

## ARE JAINA ETHICS REALLY UNIVERSAL?

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To many outside, and some within, the Jain tradition, the ethical bar seems to have been set at a daunting height. The concept of *ahimsā*, or non-violence, appears to be both universal and non-negotiable. Of course, other traditions, especially Indian ones, also subscribe to *ahimsā* as a prime value. What makes the Jain position different, however, is their capacious definition of what counts as a living being or *jīva*: as a result, it seems almost impossible not to do harm to other beings and yet remain functional as a living, sentient being oneself. Reactions to this range from astonished admiration, through incomprehension and disbelief, to outright cynicism, especially when it is realised that lay Jains operate in the modern world much like anyone else.

My argument in this paper is that such reactions stem from a basic misunderstanding or confusion, one to which some Jains themselves are not immune. The confusion arises from a conviction that Jaina ethics in general, but particularly the precept of non-violence (*ahimsā*), as followed by Jaina monks and nuns, is universal, in the sense of being equally applicable to all people, in all circumstances, at all times. (In other words, the fact that lay people, for practical reasons, cannot live up to this standard is seen as a falling off, with all its attendant karmic and soteriological consequences.) I think this view has been largely propagated and endorsed by Western students of religion, and taken up more or less enthusiastically by some Western-based Jains seeking to establish 'Jainism' as a 'world religion', and to align it with various ecological movements. It is, indeed, an understandable view, given that it is based on doctrines and precepts compiled in authoritative textual sources. But precisely because such texts were composed by ascetics, either specifically for other ascetics (monks and nuns), or, in the mediaeval period, in a conscious attempt to unify the Jain community by constructing a ladder of ascetic practices between the monastic and the lay world, it is necessary to contrast such a view with actual practice.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of the ladder, I am thinking specifically of the *śrāvakācāra* texts that have been so brilliantly analysed by Williams (1963) in his book *Jaina Yoga*. I also suspect that the indispensable and wide-ranging work of the doyen of modern Jaina studies, Professor Padmanabh Jainī, has also been influential in this respect. There, ascetic values in general, and *ahimsā* in particular are presented as a prototype or ideal to which the laity aspire, while, in practice, indeed, out of practical necessity, mostly having to settle for an inferior compromise.

I should perhaps make it clear at this point that I am not denying that ascetic values have been crucial to Jaina history, but, beyond the merely emblematic, I am questioning the importance for most lay practice of the near-total or blanket *ahimsā* required of ascetics. Of course, there are lay people (particularly women) who, from time to time, undertake strict ascetic vows, notably fasting, but in between, those same people, and many others, pursue their significant religious lives through what, in monastic terms, are the harmless activities of *pūjā* (worship). Additionally, they go about their daily lives in factories and hospitals, drive cars, fly planes, and so on. To talk about a reluctant compromise, a 'second-best future' (Norman 1991: 39), or a failure to live up to the ideal, does not, I think, reflect the reality of the situation; rather I suggest that lay Jains, in practice, if not in theory, actually have a different set of ethical values, which for most of Jaina history has not been regarded as in any way inferior to that of ascetics. Another way of putting this is to say that Jaina ethics, rather than being universal, is in fact particularistic, in the sense that not just different rules, or different interpretations of the same rules, but effectively quite different ethical standards apply to ascetics on the one hand, and laity on the other; and they do so precisely because ascetics and laity belong to different groups or categories.

Perhaps the clearest way of illustrating this point is to consider Jaina ethics in their Indian cultural context. In Hinduism, just as impurity is relative to caste, so to some extent is morality, at least in the eyes of the higher castes. The anthropologist, David Pocock (1973: 58), writes the following about the attitude of higher castes to lower ones: 'We have to rid ourselves of the notion that "low" in the caste hierarchy implies moral condemnation of such a kind that members of low castes ought to abandon their evil ways and conform to a universal set of values. Members of such castes are indeed said to be ... lightweight or shoddy, ... low and ... black – but in spite of being regarded as morally inferior, they are not morally condemned. One can often hear the phrase ... "for those people it is not a sin", used in a discussion of meat-eating, widow-remarriage, liquor drinking and any custom which the speaker regards as low.'

This reflects a classical concept, that of *sva-dharma* – 'inherent-duty' - i.e. duty according to class and caste. It is a duty you are born with – *adharma*, 'sin' in this context, is the failure to conform to your *sva-dharma*, and so to set yourself against natural law, against Dharma at the cosmic level. In other words, this is a particularistic rather than a universal ethic: different classes, different castes have different duties. This is why Arjuna must fight in the *Bhagavadgītā* – it is his *sva-dharma* to be a warrior, because he belongs to the *kṣatriya varṇa*. In the words of the *Gītā* itself (3.35): 'It is better to practise your own inherent duty (*sva-dharma*) deficiently than another's duty well. It is better to die conforming to your own duty; the duty of others invites danger.'

Moreover, as the end of the *Mahābhārata* shows us, where Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, heroes and anti-heroes alike ultimately enjoy the delights of heaven, soteriological reward is earned, not by attempting to institute Dharma at the cosmic or universal level (that, after all is God's job, and for the most part obscure to individuals), but by conforming to one's own very particular *sva-dharma*.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude does not of course prevent those who consider their *sva-dharma* to be relatively purer in terms of the caste hierarchy showing moral condescension to those less pure – as we heard from Pocock above.

It is usually thought that part of the revolutionary nature of both Buddhist and Jain teaching is precisely the rejection of this kind of particularistic ethic in favour of a universal ethical dualism of good and bad, defined somewhat differently in each case. Padmanabh Jaini (1987: 119) has been even more specific, arguing that for the Jains and the Buddhists the orthodox Brahmanical value of *sva-dharma* was replaced by the new and universal value of non-violence. While not wishing to disagree with what is self-evident – that *ahiṃsā* is a universal principle or *value* for Jains – I intend to argue that 'the karma is in the detail': what is regarded as *ahiṃsā*, in terms of its soteriological consequences, depends in effect on *who* you are (lay person or ascetic), rather than on the absolute quality of the action. In practical, or even pragmatic, terms, *ahiṃsā* is therefore a particularistic rather than a universal ethic. It may replace *sva-dharma*, but, structurally and functionally, it resembles it, differing only in so far as it is relative to mode of life rather than particular birth.

Let me explain: Jaina texts differentiate between the ethical standards expected of lay people on the one hand and ascetics on the other. This differentiation is usually presented as a modulation of intensity - we should all do (or refrain from) the same kinds of things (our ethics is universal), but for practical reasons some do so more comprehensively than others. Yet, in fact, when we look at the expected results – the effects, karmically and soteriologically, of the different kinds of behaviour undertaken by ascetics on the one hand, and laity on the other – the most striking thing is that they are not so different as the behaviour itself. Indeed, the expected results, as we shall see, tend to converge. This suggests that perhaps the difference is actually one of kind rather than quality or intensity.

Is it too radical to propose, therefore, that in the Jain case there are, or have come to be, essentially (if not explicitly) two soteriological paths, both subscribing to

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<sup>2</sup> The *Gītā*, of course, has its own means of cutting through the bind of action (*karma*), namely, *bhakti*, which is open to all as a soteriological means, regardless of caste status (*sva-dharma*). Indeed, *bhakti* is the logical corollary of a particularistic ethics, since it provides for a means of salvation which is not ultimately based on universal ethics at all. God transcends good and evil. The role of *pūjā* in Jainism seems to be very similar, although, for the Jains, of course, no amount of *pūjā* will redress major and deliberate violence.

the same general view of the universe, both striving for similar ends,<sup>3</sup> but, in practice, applying two parallel ethical codes which are particular to the individual's status as either a renouncer or a layperson?

We can explore this further by making a specific comparison with early Buddhism. This, I think, is particularly instructive, not least because the idea that the Jaina monastic ethic of *ahimsā* is universal is partly derived from Buddhism, which, as Jaini points out, also subscribes to non-violence as a key ethical value.

My characterisation of Buddhism here is taken from Richard Gombrich's (1988) compelling account in his *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History*. Gombrich (1988: 67) points out that the Buddha's 'great innovation was to say that the moral quality of an act lies in the intention behind it'. This overturns the *sva-dharmic*, that is to say, particularistic ethics I outlined above, since the intention of one person cannot be ethically of quite a different kind from the intention of another: it can only be virtuous or wicked. (We, of course, make a similar if less coherent distinction in law between actions that are premeditated, impulsive, and entirely accidental.) For the good Buddhist, therefore, it is 'purifying action' (*puṇya karma*), in the sense of good intention, which brings rewards in this and future lives. Karma is thus internalised. But 'since acting is really mental, doing a good act is actually purifying one's state of mind. In meditation, such purification is undertaken directly, without any accompanying action. Thus there is a logical continuum between the moral actions of a man in the world and the meditations of a recluse. This shows why the Buddhists claim morality to be a prerequisite for meditation. The system is all of a piece' (Gombrich 1988: 67). In other words, there is a continuum, at the moral level, between lay and monastic practice – the latter is an intensification of the former.

If we compare this situation with that faced by the Jains, however, it is less easy to claim that such a continuum exists and that the 'system is all of piece'. The difficulty is precisely because the Jaina doctrinal view of karma is that it is accumulated predominantly through external action, and specifically through harm done to the embodied souls which inhabit virtually every part of the physical universe. What this means is that karma in itself cannot be purifying (it is always

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<sup>3</sup> I am assuming here that the soteriological goal of both laity and ascetics is effectively the same. This is not the canonical view, which distinguishes between a better rebirth (perhaps in heaven) and escaping rebirth altogether. However, it seems that for most Jains this became an academic question from early in Jaina history, since it is thought that in the present morally attenuated world age no-one in this part of the universe can hope to attain liberation. What K.R. Norman (1991: 39) calls, in relation to lay prospects, a 'second-best future' actually awaits both monks and laity alike, at least as far as their next birth is concerned. One consequence of such a view, it seems to me, is that the status of the available goal (heaven / a better rebirth) is likely to be raised. This may help to account for the conflation of the soteriological effects of acquiring positive karma and shedding karma altogether (see below). My concern here is primarily with karmic effects - i. e. soteriological effects this side of the ultimate goal.

binding or re-embodiment), and that it can only be stopped and expunged through severely curtailed activity and bodily mortification. In these circumstances, a lay Jain may feel that he or she is limiting the damage being done through certain basic restraints and periods of fasting, but can hardly suppose that they are approaching ever nearer to liberation.

As I have argued elsewhere (Johnson 1995), Jaina doctrine achieves a degree of internalisation of *karman* through associating its long-term binding effects with passion. Consequently, Jains seek in the first place to control harming actions engendered by negative emotions, and only secondarily all harming actions. But again the logic of the doctrine requires restraint, control and inaction, rather than a positive ethic of virtuous conduct. According to these beliefs, there is little you can do to achieve liberation, and lay people, willy-nilly, have to exist in a world of action. So again it seems as though their way of life is inevitably morally compromised, and that the monastic institution, while at one level providing an example, at another, simply confirms their moral inferiority. If the Jaina ethic of *ahiṃsā* in its standard doctrinal form, and the consequences of neglecting it, are therefore taken to be universal rather than particular to ascetics, most lay Jains (and anyone else wanting to adopt it) are left in a position of considerable soteriological inferiority.

I am reminded of a prominent and highly educated Jain industrialist who appeared in a film made for the BBC about 17 years ago. He had started to take doctrinal Jainism seriously later in life, and had read a lot of texts. From these, and from conversations with monks, he had come to understand that his way of life was 'wrong' because his factories were doing harm to embodied creatures at some level. He could not at that time bring himself to give up his business; consequently, he spent a good deal of time (at least to camera) agonising about his inability to live up to the moral precepts of his religion. I visited him in 1997. He was then semi-retired, although he still lived in luxury. His religious life seemed to be concentrated in such activities as looking after temple sites through chairing committees, and worshipping in his family shrine. Perhaps he still considered himself to be a 'poor', or morally compromised Jain. But it seems to me that if he did, then he is significantly out of step with most of his predecessors, who, from very early in Jaina history, have actively engaged in similar merit-making activities, without apparently thinking they are anything but 'good' Jains.

Before considering in more detail how most lay Jains have acted for most of Jaina history, and the moral status of such actions, it is worth, I think, taking a closer look at what the doctrine of *ahiṃsā*, if taken to be a universal moral principle (as it is by the monks and nuns), entails in practice.

*Ahiṃsā* is the first of the 5 great vows (*mahāvratā*) taken by all Jaina ascetics and, as Paul Dundas (2002: 158) remarks, it is accepted by the two major sectarian groupings, Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras alike, as 'lying at the heart of Mahāvīra's

ethical teachings'. The list is very similar to that subscribed to by the Buddhists, and by others in renouncer-derived traditions. In the interpretation of it, however, there are considerable differences.

The full Jain list, as given in the standard compendium of doctrine, the *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, is as follows: 'To desist from injury, lying, taking what is not given, unchastity, and attachment to things (*hiṃsā, anṛta, steya, abrahma, and parigraha*)' (TS 7:1). (The final element [*parigraha*] actually refers to both 'possessions' and 'possessiveness'.)

The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* presents the standard doctrine, but these vows first appeared in the oldest text in the Śvetāmbara Jaina Canon, the *Āyāraṃga Sutta*, in a passage which leaves us in no doubt about the comprehensive nature of the vow of *ahiṃsā*, and by implication the impossibility of adhering to it unless you are a fully-fledged ascetic. It goes like this: 'I renounce all killing of living beings, whether subtle or gross, whether mobile or static. I shall not myself kill living beings, nor cause others to do it, nor approve of it. As long as I live, I shall confess, repent of, and avoid these three kinds of violence, mentally, vocally, and physically' (Āy 2.15, after Jacobi 1884).

The crucial element here, and what makes this vow so difficult to carry out, is the depth of the category of living beings. The *Āyāraṃga Sutta* distinguishes six types of embodied souls or living beings, split into two groups - *trasa* or 'mobile' beings, and *sthāvara* or 'static' beings. 'Mobile' beings are all those creatures which, according to Jain taxonomy, have two senses or more. These include human beings, animals, birds, and insects - in other words, probably everything most of us would regard as being alive in some sense. 'Static' or 'immobile' beings are those with a single sense (that of touch), and so they are also known as *ekendriya* - 'one-sensed beings'.

These beings that possess the sense of touch only – whose individual awareness or consciousness, what characterises them as living beings (*jīva*), is confined or trapped within that one mode, the tactile – are not, as we shall see, very easy to avoid.

They are classified into 5 distinct types:

- 1) earth-bodies *pṛthvī-kāyika*
- 2) water-bodies *āp-kāyika*
- 3) fire-bodies *tejo-kāyika*
- 4) air or wind bodies *vāyu-kāyika*
- 5) vegetable bodies *vanaspati-kāyika*

To be an 'earth-body' means that you inhabit a single molecule of the element earth, and so on. Or to put it the other way round, each single 'molecule' of the four fundamental elements provides a body for a *jīva* or soul.

The vegetable bodies (*vanaspati*) are of two kinds. First there are those that have an entire plant body to themselves (called *pratyeka*) on the basis of 'one mango, one *jīva*'. And second, there are those that assume collective forms (*sādhāraṇa*). So a tree, for instance, or particular kinds of plants and vegetables (a carrot, or a bulb of garlic, for example) may contain or be comprised of many souls. (This, of course, is one of the reasons why Jaina ascetics will eat some kinds of vegetables and not others).

It seems that it was out of this notion - that souls, living beings, are clustered in various parts of certain plants (in roots, bulbs, seeds, etc.) - there later developed an idea that the whole universe is full of sub-microscopic creatures called *nigoda*. These do not possess individual bodies but exist as part of a cluster - one which lives and dies as a group. (They are said to attain rebirth in the same state eighteen times in the space of a single human breath.) Moreover, these *nigoda* may, as clusters, occupy the bodies of other, better-embodied *jīva* (humans, animals and plants - but not gods, hell-beings or the single molecule element beings).

Leaving aside *nigoda* (which perhaps owe their existence to scholastic over-enthusiasm), the Jaina ascetic is still left in a precarious situation, since, as we have seen, his vow of *ahiṃsā* is taken in regard to all living beings, mobile and static. The *Āyāraṃga Sutta* attempts to help him out by listing five 'realisations' or specific practices (*bhāvanā*) associated with each vow. In Paul Dundas' (2002 158-9) words, the 'realisations' connected to the first vow: 'delineate particular areas in which violence might occur and with regard to which the ascetic must take special care. Firstly, he must closely observe how and where he walks lest he injure life-forms on the way. .... The next two realisations are implicit in the vow itself, enjoining the ascetic to control mind and speech lest they be agents of violence. Fourthly, the ascetic has to take care about how he puts down his alms bowl and, fifthly, all food and drink has to be inspected to ensure there are no life-forms within it.'

Most post *Tattvārtha Sūtra* commentators take the vow of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) to be the basis of the other vows. They also regard each vow as having a dual nature (e. g. Tatia 1994: 170, on TS 7.1): it has both a passive and an active, an 'ought not' and an 'ought to', a detached and an attached aspect. As Tatia (1994: 169) puts it, summarising the Digambara commentary, the *Sarvārthasiddhi*: 'To practise non-violence with detachment is to not be violent whereas to practise non-violence with attachment is to be compassionate in the worldly sense.'

Moreover, while detached non-violence inhibits the inflow of karma, attached non-violence (i.e. compassion) generates good or beneficial karma. This interpretation is clearly made under the influence of lay concerns (either directly or

because the monks are attentive to lay interests), since lay people may take a partial or relaxed version of these same vows – effectively an active version of them, known, significantly, as *aṇuvratas* or 'lesser vows'.

Indeed, according to later, laity-concerned Jaina theory, one major distinction between the vows taken by the ascetic – the monk or nun – and those taken by lay people is that, while the vow of non-harming or non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) as taken by the monk or nun, applies, as we have seen, not just to the 'mobile beings' but to all immobile (*sthāvara*), one-sensed beings as well, the lay vow-taker, is only bound not to harm beings with two or more senses. The formula, which the aspirant recites before a monk, is as follows: 'I will desist from the knowing or intentional destruction of all great lives [i.e. embodied mobile souls]. As long as I live, I will neither kill nor cause others to kill. I shall strive to refrain from all such activities, whether of body, speech, or mind' (Jaini 1979: 173). The significant difference between this and the 'great' or total vow of non-harming taken by the ascetic, is not simply its restriction to mobile souls, but the insertion of the qualifiers 'knowing' and 'intentional' in respect of destruction.

As Padmanabh Jaini (1979: 170-1) points out: 'Jaina teachers have drawn a distinction between injurious activities which are totally forbidden and those which may be tolerated within strict guidelines. The first of these categories is designated as *saṃkalpajā-hiṃsā*, and includes all deeds involving intentional, premeditated violence. Such deeds are contrasted with those of the *ārambhajā-hiṃsā* variety, which either occur accidentally or may result from the performance of an 'acceptable' occupation.'

The example of an 'acceptable' occupation given by Jaini is surgery. He writes that: 'Surgeons ... may cause pain or even death during a delicate operation, but are guilty only of the much less serious *ārambhajā-hiṃsā*' (Jaini 1979: 171). Such licensed harm still, of course, has bad karmic, i.e. soteriological consequences (as Jaini's use of the term 'guilty' reveals); if it did not, then there would be no bar to ascetics causing it as well. Expressed in this way, and presented in terms of a 'lesser' vow, such harm is obviously a pragmatic concession formulated by monks for the benefit of their lay followers. The clear implication of this is that, as far as monastic, i.e. doctrinally normative Jainism is concerned, at the level of soteriological consequences, there is a universal ethic of *ahiṃsā*; but since it is only possible for ascetics to implement or conform to it in a significant way, the soteriological progress of non-ascetics is dependent upon the degree to which they can emulate the *mahāvratas*, i.e. become less like lay people and more like ascetics. This is the whole *raison d'être* of the mediaeval handbooks of lay conduct I mentioned earlier.

One author of a highly influential manual of this type, the 10th century Digambara, Somadeva, makes a distinction in his *Upāsakādhyāna* between *laukika* ('worldly') and *pāralaukika* ('other worldly') dharma. These are essentially two



different kinds of *dharma* available to the householder. But this does not, as one might expect, make a distinction between ascetic and non-ascetic Jaina practice; rather it differentiates between, on the one hand, wider cultural practices and social norms (such as caste identity), which are not specifically Jain but 'worldly', and, on the other, peculiarly Jaina practices, whether temple and worship-based or ascetic, which are based on the canonical texts rather than custom. In other words, householder and ascetic are in the same karmic boat, the *pāralaukika* one; and because of its inevitably harmful nature, there is therefore every reason to consider the religious conduct of householders as ethically inferior to that of ascetics, except when householders are actually imitating the latter's asceticism (Lath 1991: 19-30).

Certainly, these mediaeval manuals of lay conduct provide a ladder, or model for logical progression from lay to ascetic life; but relatively few Jains have ascended it systematically. Of course lay Jains, particularly women, follow specific ascetic practices, such as fasting, and restricting their movement from time to time. But this is seldom a programmatic attempt to make soteriological progress in the light of the Jaina doctrine of karma, and tends to be for limited periods only. Moreover, it hardly needs pointing out that the comprehensive or near comprehensive non-violence of the ascetic is predicated on, and only possible because of, the violence perpetrated by non-ascetics in their preparation of the monk or nun's suitably 'pure' food and water. From one perspective, it is the duty and the privilege of the laity to take this violence upon themselves and suffer the karmic consequences. But another perspective, which I shall investigate below, shows that what would be disastrous violence for the monks and nuns (because they are monks and nuns) is nothing of the kind for the laity, precisely because they are laity.

To anticipate my argument a little, it is not just the case that the negative, violence-induced karmic consequences for a lay person of giving alms (*dāna*) to a monk or nun are easily compensated by the positive but, nevertheless, embodying karma accrued from this act of charity; in the modern era, at least, *dāna* (preparing and giving food, drink, and clothing) has come to be viewed as actually destructive of karma. This shift is evident if we look at the relevant passages in the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (which probably dates from the second or third century CE). There, giving or charity (*dāna*) is named as one of the causes of the influx of a kind of positive karma known as 'pleasure-producing' (TS 6.13 = SS 6.12). It is defined specifically as: 'the act of giving [something] away for the purpose of conferring benefit on one's self (*anugrahārthaṃ svasyātisargo dānam*) (TS 7.33 = SS 7.38)'. In fact, the two earliest commentaries on this passage describe charity (*dāna*) as the act of giving something away for the benefit of oneself and others. One of these, the Digambara *Sarvārthasiddhi*, differentiates between the benefit acquired by the lay donor, which is a store of merit (i.e. positive karma or *puṣya*), and that acquired by the recipient monks, which is advancement along the path to liberation as a result of their worldly

needs being taken care of for them (SS 7.38). However, the most recent translator of the *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, Dr Nathmal Tatia, basing his interpretation not simply on these two early commentaries, but on their successors, and, it seems, on contemporary Jaina self-understanding, writes here (as a summary of the commentarial tradition on this verse): 'The giver gives for his own benefit with a sense of gratitude to the recipient. Charity practised with a pure heart helps weaken karmic bondage' (Tatia 1994: 183). This formulation gives a different nuance, at the very least, to the results of *dāna*. By giving to ascetics, you can acquire some of the karmic benefits of actually practising asceticism. And as I hope to show, this tendency to make positive, lay activity actually destructive of karma is even further advanced by some accounts of the significance of the material worship (*dravya-pūjā*) of Jaina Tīrthaṅkaras. Before proceeding to this, however, I shall summarise my argument so far.

Beyond what Dundas (2002: 190) has called the 'monastic idealisation' found in the handbooks of lay behaviour, there is, in my view, no general expectation that the laity should try to conform to some universal standard of *ahiṃsā*. Indeed, the general attitude is reminiscent of the Hindu particularism I outlined at the beginning: 'For those people it is not a sin'. This is as much as to say, there are higher values, but they are not universally applicable: it is not a sin for them because of who they are. The difference between this and the Hindu case, of course, is that a lay Jain can become 'someone else', a monk or a nun, if they choose to do so, whereas a Hindu cannot change his or her caste.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is precisely this possibility of a legitimised change of status via renunciation which, in the Jain case, allowed some monastic writers to create an asceticised and karmically integrated behavioural ladder which, in theory, lay people are to ascend in their quest for better rebirths and, ultimately, liberation.

To consider this in more general terms: if the ascetic doctrines concerning *hiṃsā*, and its bad karmic effects, are taken as definitive constraints on progress towards a better rebirth, let alone liberation, then most lay Jains are, at best, either soteriologically stalled or crawling along in the slow lane. That such ascetic doctrines are not in fact taken in this way (either by the laity or by contemporary ascetics *vis à vis* the laity) is suggested by the fact that lay Jains today (and this is probably true of much of the past as well) very seldom formally take the *aṇuvrata* (or lesser vow) of *ahiṃsā* (which, as we have seen, is clearly based on the ascetic *mahāvratā*). Instead,

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<sup>4</sup> Caste groupings have sometimes changed their caste habits in an attempt to raise their status - a phenomenon known to anthropologists as 'Sanskritization' - demonstrating that purity is as much a social as a moral or soteriological concept in the Indian context. The fact that the Jain tradition is composed of at least two ways of life - lay and monastic - is, of course, the inevitable consequence of its historical development from a loose, ascetic association into a 'religion' with a wider following. The effective particularism of its ethics is therefore also a function of that historical change.

they express their identity as Jains through the basic *ahimsā* of a vegetarian diet, and through worshipping asceticism in various ways, rather than actually practising it.

Paul Dundas (2002: 191) points out the difference between the 'ways in which lay people and ascetics envisage non-violence': '[t]he layman is typically portrayed by the ascetic writers as being by his very nature continually implicated in violence and destruction, even when he is acting for ostensibly pious motives'. From the ascetic's point of view, therefore, the best way to escape these dilemmas of lay existence is through renunciation. Yet, 'Jain lay people, although maintaining a respectful attitude towards animals and lower forms of life, taking care to conform to traditional dietary prescriptions and following trades and professions which do not blatantly infringe the principle of non-violence, seldom exercise their imaginations greatly about the religious implications of their normal day-to-day activities, placing the emphasis instead, if challenged, on their purity of intention'. He goes on to say: 'What is important in Jain lay behaviour is not precise conformity to a canonical pattern of religiosity ... but the manifestation of pious intentions and correct ethical dispositions through public participation in religious ceremonies, worship and community affairs, the enhancement of the prestige of oneself and one's fellow Jains through religious gifting and the correctness of one's business affairs and family alliances' (Dundas 2002: 191-2).

While certainly agreeing with the general tenor of this, I prefer to interpret lay Jain behaviour in terms of an implicit particularisation of ethics rather than any lack of interest or imagination about the religious implications of day to day activities as such. In other words, I suggest that, rather than being pragmatically oblivious to some universal, monastically defined ethical standard, they are in reality tacitly conforming to a different ethic, from which they, nevertheless, expect similar results. Because this is implicit, and has not been formally codified, some are understandably embarrassed when the apparent contradiction between their behaviour and the monastic ideal of *ahimsā* is pointed out to them, and fall back on the proto-Buddhist solution of 'purity of intention', which can, at least at some level, be connected to the classical karma theory.

Let me illustrate the way in which this alternative, or parallel, ethic of good (in the sense of karmically and soteriologically beneficial actions) operates. Essentially, this hinges on what kinds of behaviour destroy karma, and specifically on the question of whether positive actions (as opposed to inaction and asceticism) can do so. Alms-giving has already provided an example of a positive action which has increasingly come to be regarded as destructive of karma; there is, however, an even clearer case.

The most obvious and typical activity undertaken by lay Jains is *pūjā* – worship of images of ascetics in the majority *mūrtipūjaka* tradition, and veneration of living ascetics and of the principle of knowledge in the non-image-worshipping

traditions. Confining myself to the majority case, one of the reasons for worshipping the Jina or Tīrthaṅkara is that it is an activity which gives access to the power generated by great asceticism, both in terms of its karmic (that is to say, liberating) function, and, at least in some times and places, its capacity to satisfy more worldly ends.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the mechanism by which this occurs can be, and usually is, accounted for in terms of the results of the individual worshipper's inner and outer actions. But as the anthropologists Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 45) have explained, although there is 'a clear conceptual distinction between gaining merit (good karma) and removing or "burning off" karma (whether good or bad), there is no correspondingly clear distinction between the actual practices which cause these different sorts of internal process'. And they go on to suggest that *pūjā* is regarded as bringing both *punya* (i. e. good karma) and its effects, and purification of the soul (the shedding of karma altogether) (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 45). That is to say, there is no clear distinction between the effects of practising asceticism and worshipping asceticism (chiefly the prototypical ascetic, the Jina). There is, therefore, at the very least, a tendency to transfer the karmic effects of the former (asceticism) to the latter (worship).

John Cort has provided a clear summary of this process in general terms. He writes: 'Veneration involves the praise and adoration of a superior being, whether a departed, enlightened, and liberated Jina or a living, unliberated mendicant. In the Jain case it also plays an integral part in the process of liberation, which is attained by the removal of all karmic attachments and stains. By venerating the superior qualities of a being who is more advanced along the path to liberation, one absorbs some of those qualities into one's being, and thereby both eradicates previously accrued karma and prevents the accrual of more karma. These are integral elements in the Jain process of liberation' (Cort 1995: 327). In short, karmically speaking, the worship of asceticism is thought by many to bring at least some of the effects of its actual practice<sup>6</sup> – a practice that is configured precisely by the ethic of near total *ahiṃsā*.

In the modern era, confirmation of the widespread acceptance of this attitude comes from the monastic community itself. Let me give two examples. First,

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<sup>5</sup> See Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 170) on the tendency in practice for some Jains to appeal to the Jina, and not just to the protective deities (*śāsana-devatā*), for this-worldly help. See also Cort's translation of part of Ācārya Vijay Ānandasūri's *Jain Tattvadarśa*, where the 19th century teacher says: 'those who worship God [the Jinas] out of a supreme sentiment get fruit in this life in the form of wealth and also quite definitely get even better rewards in the next life' (Cort 1995: 605).' And see, especially, Nandi (1973: 166-67) on the tantric use of *pañcaparameṣṭhī* for magical and protective ends.

<sup>6</sup> As Paul Dundas (2002: 170-1) remarks, although non-existent in the oldest texts, devotional activity was not only considered a necessary part of the Jain path from the early period, but was also credited with the ability to destroy karma.

Lawrence Babb (1996), in his book *Absent Lord*, quotes from a layman's manual written by a nun called Hemaprabhāśrījī and published in 1977. She writes: 'Just as the *darśan* of the supreme soul (... meaning the Tīrthaṅkara) makes the mind pure and becomes the means of the removal of *karma* (*karma nirjarā*), so the *pūjā* of the Lord encourages the arising of ... feelings, and the spark of these feelings will burn *karmas* and reduce them to ashes. Worship (...) is done in order to destroy sensual vices and eradicate *karma*. Just as austerity and self-denial eradicate *karma*, in the same way the Lord's *pūjā*, done with devotion, also destroys *karmas* and provides many worldly benefits (*lābh*) besides' (Hemaprabhāśrījī in Babb 1996: 92).

Babb (1996: 92) comments: 'from her standpoint, worship is really a kind of substitute form of world renunciation, which in Jainism is the principal means of shedding the *karmas* that impede the soul's liberation. In this sense the act of worshipping becomes – itself – an ascetic act. She also says that these ritual acts result in worldly benefits by means of that (relatively) positive form of *karma* called "merit" (*puṇya*). This seems to me to be as clear an example of 'having your karma and shedding it' as you could ask for.

My second example is provided by Bhadraṅkar Vijay (1903-1980), characterised by John Cort (1995: 601) as 'one of the most highly revered of all Śvetāmbara Mūrtipujaka monks of this century' (i.e. the 20<sup>th</sup>). This is taken from passages in his writings in which he 'responds to the questions of an imaginary interlocutor concerning the suitability of worshipping images of Jinās with physical offerings' (Cort 1995: 601). The potential problem, of course, is that 'worship involving physical objects also involves an element of harm (*hiṃsā*) to living beings, and therefore runs counter to the central Jain ethical principle of non-harm (*ahiṃsā*) to all living beings' (Cort 1995: 601). (The harm comes in the form of the fruit and floral offerings made, and the use of water and fire. Similar problems attend the preparation of food and water for ascetics.)

First of all the monk says: 'Devotion of God [by which he means the Jinās or Tīrthaṅkaras] destroys both separation from oneself and contact with harmful karma ... ' (Cort 1995: 602). The question is then asked: 'If a householder performs only spiritual (*bhāva*) worship [i.e. inner worship or contemplation], and not physical (*dravya*) worship, then will it work or not?' (Inner worship is the only kind of worship the monks and nuns are permitted - physical worship being inherently too violent.) The monk replies that inner worship will not work because a householder's mind requires the stability of an external support. He goes on to say: 'Not only that, all his [i.e. the householder's] other activities involve physical matter and are successful, so therefore his mind is satisfied in the realm of religion by physical things. Since his mind is oppressed by worldly worries and intrigues, he cannot attain any result

through spiritual worship. A householder is involved with physical things, so his religion cannot be successful without physical worship (Cort 1995: 603). He characterises the temple as: 'the path to heaven ... the pillar of liberation ... the lock on the door to hell' (Cort 1995: 605). And elsewhere, in reply to his own question about the way in which worship benefits the soul, answers: 'From worship of God an auspicious karmic sentiment arises in the soul. At the time of worshipping God the worshiper becomes humble, and sings praises of God, from which a sentiment of gratefulness becomes evident. From this gratefulness, knowledge-obscuring and other karmas are destroyed, and the soul gradually advances on the path to liberation' (Cort 1995: 606).

In terms of the standard Jaina theory of karma, presented in the early monastic texts and elsewhere, there is something extraordinary about this statement - namely, the idea that auspicious karma actually destroys other kinds of karma (rather like the Buddhist model of purifying intention), and that through what, from the monastic perspective, is a harming activity, the soul can advance towards the soteriological goal of liberation.

Anticipating possible objections, Bhadrāṅkar Vijay asks himself the question: 'In the worship of God, minute living beings are killed, so aren't these rites therefore unworthy?' To which he replies: 'The injury that occurs to souls in water and vegetable bodies in the worship of God is *beneficial to householders*' [my italics] (Cort 1995: 607). He likens the householder to a thirsty traveller digging in a dry river bed, who becomes indifferent to the exertion involved because of the hope of finding water. Eventually, when he discovers it, he forgets about the exertion altogether. The monk concludes: 'In the same way, there is a small amount of injury done to living creatures in the worship of God, but in the auspicious perseverance of devotion to God, that violence is the cause of great gain' (Cort 1995: 607).<sup>7</sup>

One clear implication of this is that what is (soteriologically) beneficial to householders would not be beneficial to monks. This seems to me to be the tacit acknowledgement of a particularistic ethic of *ahiṃsā*. In other words, the ethical means by which you attain the same soteriological effect (destruction of karma) differs in accordance with your status (ascetic or lay); such a means is not, therefore, universally applicable. This is not simply a matter of one type of behaviour resulting in auspicious karma, and another in the destruction of karma: both types of behaviour are said to lead to the destruction of karma, and indeed, in the lay case, the paradoxical accumulation of auspicious karma, and so worldly benefits, as well.

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<sup>7</sup> I am reminded of Elias Canetti's aphorism: 'An act of violence, for the ritual commemoration of the abolition of all violence' (Canetti 1986: 198) – the Tirthaṅkaras and *siddhas* being those who have achieved that abolition of all violence in the Jaina context.

It is not, I think, accidental that the enabling factor of such particularism is (as it is in the *Bhagavadgītā*) a form of *bhakti* (devotion), since *bhakti* has its own imperative which undermines the strict logic of karma-tied ethics. In the *Gītā* God will save you, in the Jaina temple you will save yourself, and you will do it through action rather than its avoidance. Such action, moreover, has no universal ethical significance: it is particular to your ascribed status (caste status in the case of the *Gītā*, lay status in the case of the Jains). This is what makes *bhakti* the logical corollary of a particularistic ethics, since it provides a means to liberation which ultimately transcends the ethical differences that operate at the worldly level. This is particularly obvious in the *Gītā* where the mechanism of karma is effectively replaced by the will or grace of God; but something of the same function is played by worship of ascetics and asceticism in Jaina *pūjā*.

Let me conclude, by summarising how my model of Jaina ethics differs from those previously offered. It seems to me that, from the perspective of ethics, the standard picture of the Jain community has been drawn as follows. At one level we picture conformity to, or variance from, universal ethical demands that have clear soteriological consequences for ascetics and lay people alike. The canonical texts and the mediaeval compendia of rules for lay people are both predicated on this picture. At another level, we picture the Jaina community as creating and existing in a moral or ethical 'climate' – a generalised non-violent attitude towards the world, symbolised by various basic dietary practices and ritual behaviour. This second level is largely expressive: the sense a community has of itself, and the picture it presents to others, rather than karmically (i.e. soteriologically) significant for the individuals concerned.

I differ from this view in so far as I propose a model which allows the assimilation of positive soteriological consequences to the 'ethical climate' through ritual and devotion. Such a model assumes that it is possible to make soteriological progress in ways other than those which reproduce, or are simply lesser imitations of, ascetic practices. To put it differently, ascetic practices are predicated on an absolute or universal reading of *ahiṃsā*, whereas these other forms of 'soteriological gain' are not. The fact that they are not – that they are particular to lay Jains – resolves what might otherwise be the unbearable dilemma of living in the world and being a good Jain. In other words, rather than subscribing to a watered down version of the monastic vow of *ahiṃsā* with its watered down soteriological effectiveness, lay Jains can, instead, subscribe to the general values, live in the world, and still make significant soteriological progress, perhaps even, in the perception of some modern Jains, as much as the ascetics.

Their increased knowledge of certain types of canonical texts – texts which were originally composed by and for monks – has caused some lay Jains to regard the first pattern – the ascetic conformity to ethical demands based on a universal reading of *ahiṃsā* – as the 'true' or 'pure' Jainism, and on that basis to agonise about their own

behaviour and criticise that of their fellows. It is knowledge of the same texts, or the principle underlying them, which has led some Western students of comparative religion to worry that lay Jains are unable to live up to their own high ethical standards, that the religion is 'virtually impossible' for ordinary people and riddled with compromise. Some of the more ecologically minded have presented Jaina ethics, freed from its karmic mooring, as a universal solution to pollution and war, mainly through advocacy of the monastic vow of non-possession rather than the lay one of 'non-possessiveness'. My analysis may not satisfy such universalists, or may be simply irrelevant to their purposes, but it does answer the question of why, for instance, lay Jains drive cars. They do so because they can more than redress the karmic, and thus soteriological balance in other ways – ways that do not require the kind of ascetic and non-harming behaviour that would necessitate surrendering their driving licences. Ascetic Jains, on the other hand, do not *ride* in, let alone drive cars, because for them it *is* a sin.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to James Laidlaw who, as one of the referees of this paper, made some interesting and acute observations, which he was happy to make known to me beyond the referee's usual ring of anonymity. One area in which he takes issue with my argument (if I am not misrepresenting him) is that, insofar as lay people can choose to take temporary vows of a kind which are mandatory for ascetics (including the frequent practice of fasting), there is more common ground between ascetic and lay ethics than I allow for in the 'particularistic-universal' distinction. In other words, such practices are predicated, at some level, on a universal value or principle of ahimsa. I would certainly not wish to deny this last observation; nevertheless, it seems to me that the crucial distinction is between ascetic and lay perceptions of the karmic consequences of particular actions. From the perspective of normative (ascetic-defined) karma theory, the benefits of intermittent lay fasting, for instance, are always going to be more emblematic or promotional than soteriologically significant. It therefore requires a tacit (perhaps even unconscious) re-configuration of karma theory if lay practitioners are to feel confident that they are making significant soteriological progress. In other words, even if the value informing the practice is universal, its perceived karmic effect depends on the practitioner's particular (lay or ascetic) point of view.

For a detailed, and more theoretical, discussion of the ethical complexities at play in, especially, contemporary Jainism, see Laidlaw (1995: 12-21).



## ABBREVIATIONS

Āy – *Āyāraṃga Sutta* in Jacobi.

SS – Pūjyapāda *Sarvārthasiddhi* in Jain, S. A. and Tatia.

TS – Umāsvāti *Tattvārtha Sūtra* in Sanghvi and Tatia.

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