Philosophical Justification of Non-Violence in Jainism

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In contrast to Buddhism and Hinduism, Jainism is a less known indigenous world-view of India. Mahāvīra, who was Buddha’s contemporary around the 5th c. BCE, is perhaps the best known representative and reformer of Jainism. However, according to Buddhist and Jaina sources, the origins of Jainism go back at least 250 earlier, to Mahāvīra’s predecessor, Pārśva. These two, Pārśva and Mahāvīra, are regarded as enlightened and therefore omniscient beings who broke their bondage to worldly life and have taught others how such a liberation can also be achieved. They (Pārśva and Mahāvīra) are known as Conquerors or Victorious Ones, i.e. Jinas, from which the word Jaina is derived, to refer to a follower of the Jinas. In the Universal History of the Jainas, which encompasses mythical time, 24 such Jinas are mentioned who are born in the world at different times and teach the Jaina doctrine as ‘ford’ or bridge-makers, tīrthaṅkaras. Their teaching is like a bridge over the sea of rebirth, namely from the shore of this-worldliness to the other side, from bondage to liberation. If there is one single teaching which is common to all the Jinas then it is that of non-violence, the renunciation of all kinds of violence.

Violence was and has always been a part of life in India. At the very same time, however, the command and the practice of non-violence has had a very high status, also since ancient times. All the three ancient indigenous traditions in India, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, have propagated the idea of non-violence in often very similar ways. Hans Bakker (1991: 80), who has written a significant analysis of the Hindu-Muslim Conflict in Ayodhya, speaks about an ‘idealized image’ of the Indian culture and society ‘as more than ordinarily pacifistic and moral.’ He quotes Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who, for example, speaks of the brahmins as a ‘gentle race of men’, ‘happy lambs’ “whose idea of God is ‘great and beautiful’ and whose ‘morals are pure and lofty’”. On the other hand, it is well-known that there were very few periods without wars and violence in India. Especially in view of the events during the Independence Movement and the ongoing Hindu-Muslim conflicts, including the problems with the so-called Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the ‘idealized image’ referred to above breaks down terribly. At the very same time, and in India itself, there have always been very strong anti and non-violence movements, similar to what Mahātmā Gāndhi did for the Independence Movement in which he used non-violent methods and exploited it also politically. It is significant to note in passing that Gāndhi took over the idea of and the extreme emphasis on non-violence from Jainism, as also the practice of fasting which he effectively exploited for political pressure.

The extreme emphasis on non-violence as a supreme ethical principle in Jainism can be metaphysically substantiated. In what follows I would like to give a brief sketch of Jaina metaphysics so that we can try and see how violence and non-violence feature in it. One can speak about the 7 ‘basic truths’ in Jaina philosophy which not only entail the two basic principles of Jaina ontology (jīva and ajiṣṭha) but also summarises Jaina metaphysics as a whole. Jīva, the principle of sentience/life or consciousness as such, is in many ways similar to ātman or puruṣa (jīva in Jainism has vīrya like ātman/puruṣa has śakti in Śaivism). Ajiṣṭha is the non-sentient principle and it stands for the 5 insentient categories which constitute it. Ajiṣṭha is made up out of matter which in time and space can move or be at rest (pudgala, ākāśa, kāla, dharma, adharma).

The key term for understanding the importance of non-violence, is the role and function of matter (pudgala). It is
important because in Jainism matter ‘flows into’ the soul or jīva and becomes transformed into karma. The term karma here means the condition under which the the soul reaps the results of all actions, namely actions which cause pain and suffering or joy and pleasure. It is unique to Jainism that karma is actually matter, namely fine and invisible matter which flows into the soul and adheres to it. By doing this the fine and invisible matter particles veil and cover the soul, so much so that the soul is not free and unhindered to perform its innate abilities and functions. Obviously, it is necessary to cleanse or purify the soul of the burden of these fine invisible particles of matter so that it is liberated from all hindrances and can function in an unhindered way in accordance with its innate abilities. In order to free the soul of this burden of matter the Jainas prescribe ascetic purificatory exercises which, for ordinary individuals are very severe, like fasting regularly over long periods (Mahātmā Gāndhi did this too, as we saw above).

So, the basic question is: how does such an inflow/influx of matter into the soul take place at all?

We mentioned the 7 ‘basic truths’ already with jīva and ajīva, the first 2 basic truths and the third truth now is precisely this influx (āsrava) of fine matter particles into the soul. The influx takes place because of the so-called ‘actions’ of the soul which attract matter to it. How did the first action take place, which set in motion the entire cycle of rebirths because karma? As with Buddhists and Hindus, the Jainas too say that the story of the sentient principle or soul in Jainism begins with its association with matter since beginningless time and because of this the innately unrestricted and unlimited soul becomes veiled, hindered and limited by matter. So, the Jainas merely ascertain that it is so, in a way similar to the others who accept karma and rebirth theory. For the Jainas the soul is innately perfect and this perfection encompasses faith, knowledge, conduct, energy and bliss. However, because matter flows into the soul, becomes transformed into karma and adheres to the soul, its innate abilities become fettered/shackled – the Jainas often use the image of dust settling down on a surface besmeared with oil. Precisely this bondage (bandha) is the fourth basic Jaina truth.

However, there is the possibility to prevent an influx of matter/karma and this condition of the possibility of stoppage (samvara) of further influx is the fifth basic truth. Such a stoppage is possible for example through proper conduct as in attentiveness and care in thinking, speaking and doing (in alms gathering, forbearance, humility and anupreksas).

The sixth basic truth is the dissociation or destruction of the matter/karma already accumulated, namely its erasure or deletion (nirjarā). This can be achieved through ‘external’ and ‘internal’ asceticism, through fasting, other castigations and other trials and tribulations, and through study and meditation.

If the soul is able to completely remove all the fine karma particles then it is liberated from all external influences. This liberation is the seventh basic truth, namely mokṣa. The soul is then free to exist in its own innate nature, without any hindrance, with its unlimited energy (vīrya), perfect in faith (darśana), knowledge (jñāna) and conduct (cāritra).

This metaphysical background has been taken from Umāsvāti’s (ca. 5th c. work) Tattvārthasūtra (TS 1, 1-4) written before the 5th century CE.

What, now, does violence/non-violence have to do with metaphysics in Jainism? What is the relation between them? The relation between them is that every single act or deed that we perform leads to an influx of matter/karma into the soul. According to the Jainas every act, and especially if it involves violence, killing or destruction of life forms, leads to an influx and accumulation of a large amount of matter with terrible consequences because of the ‘bad’ karma in the soul. An avoidance of violence and destruction is a prerequisite for the fact that eventually no matter flows into the soul and therefore no karmas with negative consequences can develop. This simply means that we have to be careful with every little thing we do.

The first sūtra in Umāsvāti’s TS 1, 1 summarizes everything that has been said so far: correct faith, correct knowledge and correct conduct/behaviour lead together to liberation (samyag darśana-jñāna-cāritrān mokṣa-
What concerns us here from these 'three jewels' is correct conduct or behaviour and this can be understood at two levels: at the ontological level the soul has the ability for correct conduct or behaviour innately, naturally. However, for us human beings in the world this innate nature of the soul is hindered and limited by karma and, because of this, we are called upon to discipline ourselves so that an optimal condition of the soul is reached for it to conduct itself according to its innate nature. For the Jainas this is possible through an ascetic life the aims of which basically differ from worldly life. Obviously this ascetic life is required for monks and nuns, but the Jain lay persons are also called upon in their worldly life to orient themselves in accordance with the dictates of correct conduct or behaviour. Basically this means that we should be non-violent, speak the truth, not steal, be chaste and not be greedy. The basic attitude should be one of passionlessness which loosens the attachment to worldly aims. We can understand the Jaina position even better when we discuss briefly its view of the human condition.

As with similar views in Buddhism and Hinduism, the Jaina view of the human condition points to the fact that worldly pleasures constantly and very easily seduce and lead us astray. We often overlook the fact that these joys and pleasures are only temporary and that the worldly threats are omnipresent. In a very illustrative, if even dramatic way, this human condition is described in the parable of the 'man in the well'.

A man in a huge forest was threatened by a wild elephant. He fled towards a fig tree but was unable to quickly climb it. He therefore sprang into an old, abandoned well that was nearby and which was overgrown with grass. He managed to catch a bunch of bamboo grass which grew out from the side of the well, just in time to save himself from the elephant which was trying to grab him with its trunk. The elephant could touch him but was unable to get hold of him. As he looked around in great panic he saw at the bottom of the well a large snake that threatened to swallow him and four other smaller snakes which hissed at him with their puffed up hoods. In great fear he held on fast to the bamboo bunch hoping not to fall down into the bottom of the well. As he looked up wondering what to do, he was shocked to see a white and a dark mouse gnawing at the roots of the bamboo bunch and that the enraged elephant was pounding at the fig tree with all its might. Shaken violently by these powerful blows of the elephant, hundreds of bees in a branch of the tree became alarmed and threatened to sting the man. Tormented and tortured like this from all sides the poor man noticed that a drop of honey fell from the tree, landed on his forehead, dripped down his nose and flowed into his mouth. He sucked the drop of honey greedily, tasted its sweetness with great delight, forgetting completely the calamity and disaster in which he was! (From the German by Glasenapp pp. 189-190, with bold print added.)

The Jainas draw the following moral from this dramatic story depicting a day in which everything goes wrong: the man in the well stands for the soul in Jainism, the forest is sansāra (the cycle of birth, death, birth, etc.), the tree stands for life, the water–well stands for the human situation. The elephant which threatens the man stands for death, the large snake stands for hell, the four other smaller snakes are the four passions or hasāyas (anger or krodha, pride or māna, deceit or māyā and greed or lobha), the white and dark mice are the bright and dark phases of the moon. The bees are the diseases which human beings have and, finally, the drop of honey represents the sweetness and happiness which the world has to offer. Just like this man in the well each soul forgets the terrible situation in which it is because of the passing joys the world has to offer. When it realises the disaster and calamity of the situation then the soul strives to come out, that is, it strives for liberation from suffering.

It is clear from this story that Jainism shares the general Indian view that life in the world is generally full of suffering. Similar to the Buddha’s sarvam duḥkham, the Jainas say asārah sansārah, life in the world is without value (Glasenapp p. 187). This description of the human condition and the Jaina world–view, we know, is merely a starting point and a necessary first step for a constructive view about how to escape the terrible human condition.
as the Jainas and others in India see it. It gives meaning and significance to the ‘Jaina path of purification’ and liberation.

It is the soul (jīva) that is in this terribly unhappy situation like the man in the well and it is the soul itself, as we saw, that is responsible for its deeds. The so-called three jewels in Jainism, namely correct faith, correct knowledge and correct conduct/behaviour, are signposts or guides for a liberation from the initially unrecognised and at same time unfortunate condition. The Jainas are realists and they are fully aware of the fact that the implementation of ‘correctness’ for us is not automatic because through our very existence in the world we are practically and unavoidably destructive. Jaina monks and nuns have renounced the world and are expected to practice extreme asceticism. Every evening the ascetics have to undergo a subtle examination of their conscience. As an example of the contemplation of the vow of non-violence let me present here one formulation (Mette, p. 212f., my translation from the German) : ¹

“I renounce every kind of harm to a life form, be it fine or gross, animal or plant, by neither wanting to inflict harm on it personally nor to approve of it that in my interest a life form be harmed by others, nor allow another person to harm a life form, as long as I live, in a threefold way, with my internal sense, my speech and my body.”

The ascetic then asks himself if he has neglected the five ‘attentions/rules (samiti) and thereby whether he could have harmed this rule. The first attention/rule is about walking. The monk should walk looking down at the ground, sweeping aside [gently] the small life forms he could step on with a small broom he carries with him. The second attention/rule concerns speech. The monk should ask himself whether he could have harmed a life form through a rashly/hastily spoken word. Thirdly, has he overlooked anything while collecting alms? Fourthly, has he overlooked anything while taking and putting down his utensils? Fifthly, while removing filth?

Jaina lay persons also, of course, have to adhere to the ideal of non-violence in daily life, as far as is possible. The following parable of six travelers and the mango tree relates the rule of non-violence to the satisfaction of human needs and describes how various types of people satisfy their desires in various ways and depicts the six types of souls according to Jainism:

Six travellers were walking together through a forest. After some hours they began feeling hungry and so they looked around for a fruit tree. After some time they came across a mango tree and the following suggestions were made by each: 1. One traveller who had an axe with him suggested chopping down the whole tree in order to get at the delicious ripe mangoes. 2. The second traveller held him back and suggest chopping only the main branch for the mangoes. 3. The third said that even this was not necessary, “why don’t we cut just one branch which has enough fruits”. 4. The fourth traveller had an even better idea and said: not even this would be necessary, why don’t we just break a small branch with mangoes that we can reach. 5. The fifth traveller said yes, it’s a good idea but we should be very careful. We should make sure that we take only the ripe mangoes and leave the green ones on the tree. 6. Finally, the sixth traveller said: I have a better idea: look here, below the tree. Here there are sufficient ripe mangoes for all of us. Why don’t we take them without having to harm the tree in any way?

This is a typical Jaina story that illustrates how non-violence can be implemented together with how we can conduct ourselves in our environment carefully and protectively (c/f YS 2, 35: once established in non-violence, enmity is abandoned in his (a yogin’s) presence.)

We have seen that all kinds of our actions influence our soul. In the Jaina canon 13 kinds of acts are described and 12 of them are violent acts which in fact should be avoided. It is also emphasised that these violent acts should not
only not be instigated nor supported, but also not approved of. These ideas are drawn from Mahāvīra’s teachings in the 5th c. BCE and canonised at the latest by the 5th c. CE (Schubring 1926, pp. 42-48/51-58, the chapter goes on till p. 65/76, Sūyagadā II, 2). I would like to mention these 13 kinds of action here, without details, in order to show how comprehensive the Jaina view of violence is and how these ideas occupied the Jainas from very early times:

1. purposeful violent deed (for his own benefit someone causes violence on his relatives, friends, etc.); 2. purposeless violent deed like cruel killing of animals and meaningless/senseless destruction; 3. militant violent deed as in protecting oneself or others with a weapon; 4. accidental violent deed as in accidentally killing something while doing another specific task/collateral effects; 5. violent deed through an optical illusion as in harming by falsely assuming that someone has ill intents; 6. a violent act that occurs in untrue speech; 7. in un-allowed acquisition; 8. in a [bad] mood as when depressed; 9. violent deed in pride; 10. in doing wrong to friends like punishing someone severely for a small error; 11. violence in deception; 12. in greed; and finally 13. following prescribed action, e.g. for the welfare of his soul by being careful in speech, thinking, walking, standing and eating.

Conclusion

I began with metaphysics; the ideas contained in it have been known to us at least since the 2nd c. CE, even though these philosophical ideas may have been in vogue much earlier. I would like to end with Mahāvīra’s words which plead for non-violence in an ethical and practical way. It is recorded in the Jaina canon that Mahāvīra said the following (Sūyagadā II 1, 48, Schubring, p. 39/47):

exactly as it is not nice to me if with a stick, a bone, fist, clod of earth or potsherd I am wounded, struck, threatened, beaten hurt, hit hard or killed – yes, even if just a hair of mine is pulled out, I feel vividly the injury which causes me suffering and fear of it – so too, know this, that all higher beings, all plants, all lower animals, all other living beings if wounded or killed with a stick, bone, etc., indeed even if just a hair of theirs is pulled out, [they] feel vividly the injury which causes them suffering and fear of it. If one has recognized this, then it is certain that no higher being, no plant, no lower animal, no other living being may be beaten, commanded, subdued, strangled or killed. ... This is the pure, constant, eternal teaching proclaimed by those who know ...

(Text adapted.)

Selected Literature


Notes

執筆者一覧（五十音順）

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