

Vulnerability, Transcendence, and the Body: Exploring the Human/Nonhuman Animal Divide within Jainism

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Abstract

Jainism's renowned compassion toward nonhuman animals is derived from the vulnerability and finitude we share with them. The tradition recognizes the impetus to avoid suffering and preserve life as basic to all living beings and emphasizes our shared existential condition. Nevertheless, Jainism treats the condition of being human as privileged because of its capacity for radical bodily detachment. This article, based on long-term ethnographic work among Jain communities in India, brings Jainism's traditional understandings of the human/nonhuman distinction into discussion with contemporary philosophical and anthropological reflections on the category of the "animal."

Keywords

Jainism – nonhuman animals – human exceptionalism – self-transcendence – suffering – embodiment

Prince Nemi Kumar was on his way to be married. The gilded carriage in which he sat weaved slowly toward the palace where he would soon meet his future bride. A royal retinue followed, extending back as far as the eye could see. It seemed as if the entire kingdom had come out to get a glimpse of the future king, and to share in the joy of the festivities. The path on which the chariot travelled had been cleared of debris, and its many potholes had been repaired. Every inch of its route was decorated with magnificent magnolias, beautifying and making fragrant the prince's journey. The royal band that accompanied

the chariot played joyful tunes, causing the villagers to dance with joy. Amidst the euphoria, the prince heard a sound that pierced through the mirthful cacophony of flutes and drums; it was a melancholic sound he had never before heard. His companions claimed to hear nothing beyond the happy clamor of the wedding party. But the sorrowful sounds grew louder, and they seemed to be speaking directly to the prince's innermost self, causing him great anxiety. He called to his charioteer to halt, and he stepped out from under the chariot's decorated canopy.

The villagers rushed forward to gaze at the handsome prince, but he did not see them. Instead, what he saw shocked him: the path that led to the gates of the palace was lined with cages crammed full of animals—some pacing, some cowering in fear, others crying out in distress. The prince was speechless. When his eyes met those of the frightened animals, he could feel their pain as his own, and he was full of pity. Seeing the prince's anguish, his companion said, "Oh Prince, do not be troubled. These are just beasts for your wedding feast." The words struck him like a thunderbolt: in a flash, the suffering condition of existence, and the pointlessness of all worldly desires became clear to him. He demanded the animals be released and the carriage turned back. He would not marry. After returning home, he renounced worldly life and initiated himself as a mendicant. He began his life as an itinerant wanderer, dedicating himself to the path of nonviolence and eventually gaining enlightenment. From this time on, he became known as Bhagwan (Lord) Neminath, the 22nd Jina (prophet) of the Jain tradition.

The story of Prince Nemi Kumar's renunciation of worldly life, and eventual enlightenment, is an ancient and beloved tale within the Jain community. It affirms the Jain teaching on the centrality of nonviolence for spiritual progress, commonly encapsulated in the aphorism "*ahimsa paramo dharma*" which glosses as "nonviolence is the supreme path/duty." But more than that, it provides us a glimpse into Jainism's distinctive ontology, and the tradition's understanding of human and nonhuman animal subjectivities as participating in shared existential ground. Prince Nemi Kumar's spiritual awakening did not emerge from study, meditation, or ethical reasoning; it did not arise from analytical argument or from any deployment of rational, conceptual thought which Western philosophy so celebrates—and where it typically locates human worth. Instead, it came from a confrontation with suffering. Further still, it arose not from human suffering, such as that which initiated the Buddha's awakening (namely illness, old age, and death), but from the suffering of animals, in particular, from the anguished cries of caged animals destined for his wedding feast. Prince Nemi Kumar's moral response and his

subsequent enlightenment—a cosmic event of inestimable importance for Jains—were generated by the vulnerability that he shared with animals.

The animal—or more accurately, the nonhuman—plays a role of immeasurable importance in the Jain tradition, the degree to which is astonishing in comparison with most other traditions. Its philosophy, ethics, social origin myths, rituals, everyday practices, creative cultural imaginings, and the ascetic ideal are all inescapably grounded in an engagement with a world animated by sentient, conscious nonhuman others—all of whom possess some degree of moral agency (variously compromised due to karma) and an inviolable right to life (cf. Chapple, 1993, 2006; Donaldson, 2015; Dundas, 1992; Jaini, 2000; Long, 2009; Valley, 2014). And yet, the Jain tradition does not deny the uniqueness of human subjectivity, nor does it do away with human/nonhuman animal distinctions. Instead, the tradition holds steadfast to human ontological privilege: Jains claim that humans occupy a place that makes ethical reflection possible, and from which ultimate spiritual release is attained.

While Prince Nemi Kumar recognized the cries of the caged animals as his own, that is, as expressions of the same vulnerability that all embodied beings share, he also recognized them as other: as belonging to animals for whom liberation is impossible. The animals identified so completely with their bodies that they were unable to escape their sufferings. They did not know what Prince Nemi Kumar knew, namely that fear, pain and suffering belong to the mind-body complex alone, and that the soul which remains detached becomes free. Without this insight, liberation is not attainable.

It is important to note that the tragedy of animal birth is not absolute in Jainism; all souls trapped in the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*) move continuously through different embodied life-forms, each incarnation “earned” from past karma. Human birth is but one such incarnation, albeit a privileged one. The story of Prince Nemi Kumar highlights shared creaturely suffering but it also reveals the “proper” or ideal response to suffering as that of renunciation, something available to human beings alone. The subtext of the narrative—indeed, of much of Jain teachings—is that human birth is a privilege that should not be squandered.

The thesis argued here is that human exceptionalism and reverence for all life are not antithetical within the Jain tradition, but instead appear to work hand-in-glove. This is unusual as far as world traditions go. It is far more common to find, across cultures, belief in human exceptionalism giving rise to anthropocentric ideologies and practices that exclude nonhumans from ethical consideration. Ideas of human exceptionalism are, therefore, widely treated as an anathema in the field of Animal Studies (and in the animal rights movement

more broadly), which rightly seeks to expose and dismantle systems of injustice against nonhuman animals. But the Jain tradition complicates matters: its humanism coexists with a belief in the sanctity of all life. The two appear to be co-emergent, grounded in a recognition of the vulnerability that all embodied sentient life shares.¹ The creaturely, embodied, vital dimension of existence, while a site of bondage from which one seeks escape, is also the font from which spiritual awakening arises, and gives rise to creative and revelatory forms of knowledge. Indeed, pursuing the spiritual path in Jainism is only possible after one comes to experience the world around oneself as animated by individual, embodied subjectivities, each endowed with an eternal soul on its own spiritual trajectory.

This essay endeavors to take the Jain perspective seriously, and explore, on its own terms, its understandings of human-animal relations. It begins with an historical overview of the Jain tradition, followed by a brief discussion of its worldview, and aims to situate the discussion of the animal therein.

Background on Jainism

Jains take their name, and inspiration, from the Jinas, those human beings who attained spiritual perfection and taught the path of release to others. “Jina” technically means “conqueror” and is an epithet used to describe those who overcame the egotism and violence that are the mainspring of our bondage,

1 The “animal turn,” with its concern to highlight the shared creatureliness of humans and nonhuman animals, has contributed to the growing interest in the body’s role in subjectivity and epistemology—an interest that began with such philosophers as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty (Abrams, 1997; Buchanan, 2012). Derrida (2008), in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, condemns Western philosophy’s neglect of nonhuman life as myopic and unethical, and urges a reevaluation of the ground we share in common, including that of the “anguish of this vulnerability” (p. 28). Gross (2015), in his recent book *The Question of the Animal and Religion*, employs Derrida’s tool of deconstruction to reveal the ways in which the human/animal binary plays a central, though tacit, role within the field of Religious Studies, defining the parameters of the field in terms of a human transcendence of animality. He explores the way binaries impose a logic of highlighting difference and obfuscating commonality, and how the common embodied ground we share with nonhuman others, including our shared capacity for suffering, is theorized as outside the domain of “religion.” Gross calls on the humanities to broaden its scope and set its sights beyond the human drama alone to include that of “the drama of the living” (Gross, 2015, p. 60)—a phrase that aptly encapsulates the Jain depiction of the human engagement with the more-than-human world.

causing us to be trapped in an endless cycle of birth and death. The most recent of the Jinas was “Mahavira” (Great Hero), who lived about 2,600 years ago in North East India (Dundas, 2002, p. 24). He was the last in a series of 24 such teachers, and his departure marked the end of the period of prophecy in our time cycle.

The Jinas are venerated as “gods,” though they were born with human frailties and knew the experience of suffering (Valley, 2013, p. 359). A community of renouncers, composed of both nuns and monks, formed around the charismatic leadership of the enlightened Jina Mahavira. They led austere lives centered on purifying their souls of karma through such ascetic practices as celibacy, vegetarianism, and extensive fasting (Jaini, 1979, p. 16). These practices aimed at spiritual purification, but were also motivated by compassion born of a recognition of universal existential suffering.

The overwhelming priority that Mahavira placed on nonviolence (*ahimsa*) as the key to salvation distinguished him from those of other world-renouncing traditions of ancient India (Jaini, 1979, p. 53). His teachings are contained within the tradition’s most ancient scripture, called the *Acaranga Sutra*. It states:

all breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away.

JACOBI, TRANS., 1884, 1:4:1

The followers of the Jina grew in number and, with time, established a path adapted to lay life. Today, Jains are a small but affluent global community as well-known for their philanthropy as for their commitment to nonviolence (Dundas, 2002, p. 197).

The Jain Worldview

There is no place for a creator God in the Jain worldview, which posits a cosmos that has always existed, and will continue to do so without end (Dundas, 2002, p. 12). Jains classify all that exists into two broad categories—*jiva* (soul) and *ajiva* (non-soul). *Jiva* or “soul” denotes an eternal life-force whose defining characteristic is consciousness. There are an infinite number of *jivas* in the universe which, in their pure state, are equally endowed with complete knowledge, perception, bliss, and energy. But the majority of life-forces remain trapped in the cycle of birth and death (called *samsara*) and obstructed by karmic matter (a form of *ajiva*). Karma for Jains is a material substance whose

defining characteristic is the absence of consciousness. While karmic matter experiences nothing itself, it possesses the attributes of touch, taste, smell, and color. When the soul vibrates with passion, the defiling karmic matter becomes attached to it, clouding its perception, and weighing it down. The soul, in its ignorance, continues to attract new karma with every activity of the mind and body, one life after another, setting the stage for a cosmic drama that is without beginning or end, and which would be tragic if escape were not possible.

But since time immemorial, there have been those who have succeeded in breaking free of the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*), and have taught the path of escape to others. These are the Jinas, and the path that they prescribe is one of nonviolence and self-restraint. They counsel that by limiting—eventually, eliminating—the inflow of karma and cleansing the soul of all the karmic particles it carries, the soul can be free. The process of purging is called *nirjara*. It is the purpose behind most Jain practices, and one that is (almost exclusively) open to human beings. But crucially, like all Jain practices, it rests upon an insight into the true, nonviolent nature of one's own soul, and an experience of the world around oneself as animated with individual subjectivities. Called *samyak darshan* ("right vision"), this insight gives rise to compassion, and the desire to minimize harm to all beings—large and small, visible and invisible, including even such one-sensed beings as air, all of whom are subjects in their own right.

The aspiration for total nonviolence reaches its full expression in the practice of mendicancy—an arduous path pursued by a small percentage of Jains. Most strive to minimize harm while remaining within the householder life. Whether as mendicants or householders, the Jain path presupposes the capacity to treat the body as "*ajīva*" and treat it as a project for the *jīva*'s purification.

The Ambivalent Nonhuman Animal

Of the 8,400,000 different species that Jainism claims inhabit the universe, all fall within one of four *gatis* (or birth categories): humans (*manusya*); celestial beings (*deva*); hell beings (*naraki*); and the composite category of animals, plants, insects and microorganisms (called *tiryanka*) (Tatia, Trans., *Tattvartha Sutra*; Umasvati, n.d./2002, 2.33). The soul experiences all *gatis* as it wanders aimlessly through *samsara*. *The Yoga Shastra* states:

The jivas of this universe play varieties of roles on this stage of worldly life. Sometimes born as a Brahman well versed in vedas, a slave, a god, or

an insect. As a consequence of karmas, what category of life, like a rented abode, is left unvisited by living beings?

GOPANI, 1989, 4:67

This is important, as it reveals the way in which Jains understand *all* living beings, namely, as temporarily embodied and disadvantaged to greater or lesser degrees. Animals are neither totems nor portents worthy of worship. Instead, they are fellow sufferers, viewed “without nostalgia” (to use Chapple’s terminology, 2006, p. 241). The souls of those beings within the animal *gati*, no different than in any other category, are inherently capable of spiritual release, and possess the “Four Infinitudes” of unlimited power, knowledge, perception, and bliss (Jaini, 1979, p. 90). Further, most (but not all) animals also possess “mind” (*manas*), which gives them the power of thought, including intelligence and rationality. Scriptures define those with *manas* as having “the capacity to remember the past and ponder the future” (Tatia, Trans., *Tattvartha Sutra*; Umasvati, n.d./2002, p. 46). And, of course, animal bodies suffer pain, illness, and death. The ancient Jain scripture, the *Acaranga Sutra*, quoted earlier, is unequivocal in its condemnation of violence to all beings, equating violence specifically directed at animals with the “delusion, the death, the hell” (1:1:7, 3). Though the language of the 19th century translation is now arcane, it reveals the centrality of the animal in Jainism’s ethical worldview. It is worth quoting at length:

Thus I say: There are beings called the animate, viz. those who are produced 1. from eggs (birds, &c.), 2. from a fetus (as elephants, &c.), 3. from a fetus with an enveloping membrane (as cows, buffaloes, &c.), 4. from fluids (as worms, &c.), 5. from sweat (as bugs, lice, &c.), 6. by coagulation (as locusts, ants, &c.), 7. from sprouts (as butterflies, wagtails, &c.), 8. by regeneration (men, gods, hell-beings)... Having well considered it, having well looked at it, I say thus: all beings ... [experience] ... pleasure or displeasure, pain, great terror, and unhappiness. Beings are filled with alarm from all directions and in all directions....

JACOBI, TRANS., 1884, 1:1:6

Some slay (animals) for sacrificial purposes, some kill (animals) for the sake of their skin, some kill (them) for the sake of their flesh, some kill them for the sake of their blood; thus for the sake of their heart, their bile, the feathers of their tail, their tail, their big or small horns, their teeth, their tusks, their nails, their sinews, their bones 1; with a purpose or

without a purpose. Some kill animals because they have been wounded by them, or are wounded, or will be wounded.

JACOBI, TRANS., 1884, 1:1:6

He who injures these (animals) does not comprehend and renounce the sinful acts; he who does not injure these, comprehends and renounces the sinful acts. Knowing them, a wise man should not act sinfully towards animals, nor cause others to act so, nor allow others to act so.

JACOBI, TRANS., 1884, 1:1:6

And from the 12th century *Yoga Shastra* by Acharya Hemachandra:

Every creature in this world likes happiness and dislikes unhappiness; so one should not do unto others what one does not want others to do unto him.... One should never commit violence on other jivas.

GOPANI, 1989, *Yoga Shastra*, 4:20

In these ethical pronouncements, we find animals depicted as passive recipients of human actions, and not as moral agents in their own right.² This is common in Jain scriptures. For instance, in the popular story of Prince Parshva (who would become the 23rd Jina Parshvanath), animals play a central, but passive role. One day, Prince Parshva came upon a mendicant performing a fire sacrifice (*yagya*) in the forest. With his extra-sensory vision, he could see that two snakes were trapped within a burning log. In vain, he tried to persuade the mendicant to stop the *yagya*. At last, the log cracked, and the charred snakes slithered out. As they died, Prince Parshva recited the Namokar Mantra (Jainism's central mantra) over their bodies, and upon death, they took birth in a heavenly realm as the protector deities Padmavati and Dharendra. The snakes became gods as a result of hearing the powerfully purifying mantra. Reminiscent of the story of Prince Nemi Kumar, the incident triggered in Prince Parshva the desire to renounce the world.

In the Jain narrative scriptures or "Story Angas" (Balbir, n.d.), we find a great many tales involving animals playing more active roles, usually serving as allegories for exemplary or foolish behaviors. For instance, the well-known parable of "Kumma" recounts a story of two turtles who lived at a pond, which was

2 The late animal rights philosopher Tom Regan (2004) describes "moral agents" as individuals who have "... the ability to bring impartial moral principles to bear on the determination of what, all considered, morally ought to be done and, having made this determination, to freely choose or fail to choose to act as morality, as they conceive it, requires" (p. 151).

visited by jackals one day. The turtles hid in their shells out of fear, but after some time, assuming the danger had gone, one slowly extended his limbs. He was swiftly devoured by the jackals. The other kept his limbs withdrawn and remained safe from attack. The parable serves as an analogy for renunciators to keep their five sense organs withdrawn and disciplined, lest they be devoured by worldly life. In Hemachandra's *Yoga Shastra*, we find animals similarly used to communicate the importance of sensory restraint:

An elephant, who stretches his trunk to enjoy his mate, is at once bound to the post and subjected to pain.

A fish, safe in the deep waters, when tempted to take the bait, is at once caught by the fisherman.

A wasp, when attracted by the scent of an elephant's brow, sits on it, is immediately knocked dead by the elephant's ear flaps.

Moths, fascinated by the bright golden flame of the lamp, court death by jumping into it.

A deer, curious to hear the sweet music, is at once pierced dead by the hunter's arrow.

Thus it is clear that the satisfaction of even a single sense organ leads to certain death and misery. What, then about the simultaneous satisfaction of all the sense organs? It would certainly result in death.

GOPANI, 1989, 4.33

In another parable ("Ainna") from the Story Angas, foreign merchants from far off lands are determined to capture magnificent horses as a gift for their king. Despite their efforts, only those horses that could be lured by attractive things were caught. Those that remained detached evaded capture. The parable serves as an analogy for renunciators, reminding them that attachment brings bondage and detachment means freedom. In most parables, animals serve to allegorize some greater truth of which they are unaware.

Nonhuman Animals as Moral Agents?

In some of the most popular of the Story Angas, animals appear as "moral agents" or protagonists in their own right. Here they are shown acting with remarkable self-discipline—a capacity normally reserved for human beings. Depicted as "paying for past sins yet capable of self-redemption" (Chapple, 2006, p. 248), they act intentionally and ethically, which results in rebirth as a human or a god. The best known include a lion who fasted to death, a snake

who renounced violence, a frog who adopted renouncer vows, and an elephant whose compassion for another led to his own death. It is worth considering them in some detail, since in each tale, the animals in question possess the crucial capacity of self-discipline—a capacity that Jainism normally reserves for human beings and uses to distinguish humans from nonhumans.

In *The Parable of a Lion*, in the midst of hunting a deer, a lion is startled by the sudden presence of two Jain monks. The monks, who possess supernatural powers, hover in the air before him, and reproach him for his cruelty, saying: “O King of Lions (*Mrigraj*)! You are going to be Tirthankar Mahavira after 10 births.... Now you should refrain from the saddening acts of violence and cruelty and proceed on the path of *Atmakalyan*” [soul well-being]. The words of the monks jolted the lion out of his ignorance, causing him to remember his previous births (*jati smaran*). His awakening to the truth of nonviolence (*samyak darshan*) caused him to cry out with remorse and, in the presence of the monks, he adopted the vows of nonviolence. But after taking the vows that prevented him from killing, the lion had nothing to eat. Therefore, he took the final vow of *sallekhana* (fast until death). Upon his death, he became a god in Heaven, and ten lives later, his soul became that of the 24th Tirthankar Lord Mahavira (Jaini, 2000, p. 262).

The *Parable of the Frog who Renounced* tells of a wealthy merchant by the name of Nanda who took the vows of a lay disciple after hearing Mahavira’s sermon. Filled with the desire to help others, he used his money to build a magnificent pool for all to enjoy. The villagers would continuously praise him, and soon the pool became a source of great pride. His attachment to the pool grew so intensely that when he died he was reborn a frog in that same pool. As a frog, he remembered his past life and came to understand his fate. He repented and continued to engage daily in his householder devotions. One day he overheard that the Jina Mahavira was in a nearby town, and he desperately wanted to hear his sermon again. He set out on the journey, but along the way was crushed by a horse and chariot. As he was dying, he vowed to adopt the *mahavrata*s—the five great vows of a renouncer. Because of this, he was reborn as a god (Parable 13, Balbir, n.d.).

The *Parable of Chandakaushik* tells of how a wrathful cobra was subdued through nonviolence. The evil cobra had long cast a shadow over the lands of Vachala, causing the soil to become barren and the villagers to live in perpetual dread of his appearance. His glare alone was enough to kill, and many a hapless villager fell victim to his wrath. One day, on his travels, the Jina Mahavira came upon the village of Vachala. Indifferent to the warnings of the villagers, he entered the forest in which Chandakaushik lived. The cobra immediately sensed his presence, and emerged from his cave to confront him, but unlike all

his other victims, Mahavira did not try to run away. Instead, he seemed unperturbed, and did not move. Candakaushik sprayed venom on him but nothing happened. Then he viciously bit Mahavira's foot, but in place of blood, milk oozed from the wound, and Mahavira remained tranquil.

Chandkaushik grew apprehensive and drew back. Mahavira then opened his eyes and looked upon his attacker with great compassion. His eyes communicated "Wake up! wake up Chandkaushik!! Realize what you are doing!" Suddenly, Chandkaushik recalled his previous two births and understood that his birth as a snake was punishment for his previous violence. He bowed to Mahavira and returned to his cave. When the villagers became aware of Chandkaushik's docility, some took revenge on him for his past deeds, and tortured him mercilessly. Though he suffered greatly, he remained steadfast in his commitment to nonviolence. Eventually he died, and was reborn in heaven (Anonymous, 2017).

Finally, *The Parable of the Elephant and the Rabbit* tells of the compassionate actions of the elephant called Meruprabha. A terrifying fire had broken out in the densely populated forest in which he lived and threatened all the creatures that lived there. The animals all followed this King of Elephants toward the only space not consumed by flames and huddled together. Soon the space was overcrowded with no room for the animals to move. They remained motionless and quietly endured. An irrepressible itch caused Meruprabha to raise his foot to scratch himself. The moment he did this, a rabbit darted in, escaping the surrounding flames. If Meruprabha were to lower his foot, he would crush the rabbit; and to make it scurry would mean certain death in the fire. So, the enormous elephant held his foot aloft for the 3 days that the fire raged. When it finally subsided, the animals returned to the forest in safety. But Meruprabha, in pain and exhausted, collapsed and died shortly after. Due to his compassion and restraint, he was reborn as prince Megkakumar, who would become a disciple of Jina Mahavira and within a few births, attain liberation (Parable 1, Balbir, n.d.).

These popular narratives are often used to suggest a radical egalitarianism between humans and nonhuman animals in Jainism, since the nonhuman animals, like humans, possess the capacity for self-transcendence and engaging in ethically-informed acts of self-discipline. For instance, Padmanabh Jaini (2000) claims they serve as "illustrations of [the] capacity of animals to lead a spiritual life" (p. 263). And in *Jainism: The World of Conquerors*, Natubhai Shah (2004) refers to these narratives when he claims that animals in Jainism are spiritually equivalent to householders. Under the heading "Animals As Laity," he lists those capacities which nonhuman animals and humans share, namely: "a discriminating capacity for good and evil; a capacity to remember their past

lives; a capacity to acquire clairvoyant knowledge; the instinct for the desirable and avoidance of the undesirable; the capacity to perform fasting, penance and self-control and change their behavior; the capacity to hear religious scriptural sermons etc.” (Shah, 2004, p. 153).

While the animals in the narratives certainly manifest the spiritual capacities that Jaini and Shah enumerate, their ability to do so is exceptional, and connected with the presence of the Jina. All but one of them was under the direct influence of the Jina Mahavira: the lion was an early incarnation of the Mahavira himself, the snake was spiritually awakened as a result of an encounter with Mahavira, and the frog was a lay disciple of Mahavira. Even the elephant, who did not meet Mahavira personally, lived during the Jina’s lifetime, and therefore was within his sphere of influence. The presence of a Jina is a cosmic event, spiritually elevating the environment and all beings within it. The land upon which a Jina walks becomes a place of pilgrimage; his *darshan* (vision) acts as a powerful catalyst for enlightenment. And all beings who gather at the Jina’s preaching hall, called the *samasvarana*, are capable of flawlessly comprehending his teachings and of becoming spiritually purified. The role of a living Jina is so crucial for spiritual progress that liberation is not possible in those places or time periods (such as our own) without a Jina.

That Jainism recognizes animals as spiritual beings endowed with a soul which, given the right circumstance, can attain its full capacity for moral agency and self-realization, is hugely important, and should not be downplayed. But it is also important to note that such circumstances are extremely rare, and that the animals in the narratives are not representative of “normal” animals; their self-discipline and moral agency are due to the catalytic influence of the Jina, which enabled them to reach spiritual heights not normally open to those within their *gati* (birth category). Far more common is the view of animals as having grasping, greedy natures, with “animal” a term of derision for those who lack self-discipline. *The Yoga Shastra* states: “He who goes on eating, day and night, is verily an animal, though devoid of horns and tail” (Gopani, 1989, 3.62).

Animal bodies are generally understood as punishment for past sins—an idea that is explicit in most of the above narratives. The *Tattvartha Sutra*, one of the few scriptures considered authoritative by all Jain communities, plainly states: “Deceitfulness leads to birth in animal realms” (Tatia, Trans., *Tattvartha Sutra*; Umasvati, n.d./2002, 6.17), and in *The Yoga Shastra*, the cause is gluttony: “Those who eat at night are born (in next birth) as owl, crow, cat, vulture, pig, stag, serpent, scorpion, mongoose, etc.” (Gopani, 1989, 3.66). The body that every living being possesses is the fruit of past karma; we each inhabit the body that we “deserve,” and animal birth is widely identified with past violence, gluttony, and treachery.

Clearly, animals occupy an ambivalent space within the Jain tradition. Birth in an animal body is ultimately a misfortune because it is not conducive to pursuing the spiritual life; karmically encumbered, it does not permit the discrimination of soul from body. It is worth repeating a point made earlier: the tragedy of animal birth is not absolute in Jainism; all souls trapped in *samsara* move continuously through different embodied life-forms, each incarnation “earned” from past karma. Human birth is but one such incarnation, albeit a privileged one.

Human Birth: The Envy of the Cosmos

The chance of being born human in a cosmos so congested with sentient life, and so ripe with alternative possibilities, is exceptionally rare. Rarer still is the opportunity to learn about, and pursue, the path of release. Jain cosmology is complex, and few outside the mendicant community are well-versed in it, but even a cursory glance reveals the degree to which human birth is a privilege. In an immensely vast three-tiered cosmos, humans take birth in just a few continents of its middle region. Of them, only one, called Jambudvipa (or “Rose Apple” continent) permits spiritual liberation—and then, only from small sections of it.

Further still, the Jinās, without whom the path of escape would be unknown, only take birth during specific time periods, lest their teachings go unheeded. In the great cycles of time, characterized by immense epochs of progress and decline, those periods of perfect happiness are not conducive to spirituality, as the *jīva* (soul) is too immersed in sensory delights to be bothered with spirituality. Some degree of suffering is essential to awaken compassion and stir the soul. Analogously, periods of intense suffering, which cause the *jīva* to over-identify with the body, are also unsuitable for spiritual insight. Favorable periods for the dissemination of the Jinās’ teachings are limited. All of this makes clear the great fortune it is to be born human in a part of the cosmos favorable to spiritual release, during a time when the teachings of the Jina are still accessible. Most living beings of the three realms languish in ignorance. Knowing the correct path and *having the ability to act on it* is an immense privilege that Jains believe resides with human beings alone.

Human birth (*manuṣya gati*) is singled out as unique in the whole of the cosmos because it alone has the capacity for self-transcendence, which in turn enables it to act on the knowledge conveyed by the Jina. For most living beings, including most humans, the soul or life-force (*jīva*) is completely dominated by desires generated by the body-mind complex, most especially for food, sex,

and ego-gratification. Humans alone have the opportunity to observe its embodied self and compel it to act in accordance with principles that, at times, may be quite alien to the body's instinctive appetites.

The capacity for self-transcendence is celebrated because it provides humans with the vantage point of an observer. Only in human form is the *jiva* able to transcend or “stand outside” its body and come to know itself as a spiritual being. Without this capacity for self-reflection, there would be no space for ethics nor any possibility of escape from *samsara*. In its absence, we would effectively be under the dominance of attachments and aversions which, according to Jains is the fate of animals.³ An oft-heard aphorism in Jainism captures this idea:

Human beings are equal to animals
As far as food, sleep, fear, and sex are concerned;
They are distinguished only because of *dharma*
[A person who] lacks *dharma* is the same as the animals.

CITED IN JAINI, 1979, P. 253

The capacity for self-transcendence is what makes humans unique, but if that capacity is undeveloped, claims to uniqueness become meaningless. Human exceptionalism resides singularly in its demonstration, through ethical behavior and practices of bodily detachment. This reaches its zenith in the voluntary fast to death, called “*sallekhana*,” (denoting the “thinning or scratching out” of the body). Though infrequently practiced, it is treated as a spiritual ideal; a culmination of the spiritual path that one has, in effect, been preparing for throughout one's life (Laidlaw, 2005). There is no better way to demonstrate the absolute autonomy of the soul than by voluntarily, and permanently, severing its connection with the body. With very few exceptions, all nonhuman animals (and most humans, including most Jains!) cling to embodied existence, making the fatal flaw of equating embodied existence with life itself, dooming themselves to a ceaseless existence in the cycle of birth and death.

In brief, contrary to all other incarnations, the possession of a human body is worthy of recognition and celebration because it alone permits the discrimination of soul from body and the pursuit of religious (i.e., renunciatory) activities. Crucially, it is the only one incarnation from which liberation (*moksha*) is attainable. Being human, the Jain tradition insists, is a prized possession and one that should not be wasted.

3 It is important to stress that self-transcendence is not the source of, and can never be equated with, moral worth in Jainism—as the latter is an intrinsically held quality of all *jivas*.

Conclusion

That Jainism combines a kind of conditional “anthropocentrism” with ultimate ontological egalitarianism is not unusual: indeed, it is quite commonplace for religious traditions to justify temporal inequalities while decrying them in a final state of perfection. However, within the Jain tradition, the two delicately hinge upon each other: human birth is celebrated *because* it can transcend embodied “animal” life, but human privilege is only established through a fraternal solidarity with it.

I have suggested that the co-existence of an ideology of human exceptionalism with the active reverence for all life, as found within Jainism, should give us pause. Exploring the Jain tradition on its own terms has meant taking seriously the idea that the human/nonhuman binary, in and of itself, is not intrinsically problematic. Not all binaries are created equally; it is the particular nature of the binary—how it is conceptualized and enacted—that merits further scrutiny. Problematic are those that construe subjectivity on one side of the divide as human-specific, decorporealized phenomena alone. That such views do violence to the richness of nonhuman lives is incontrovertible, but unwittingly they profoundly misrepresent human experience as well by ignoring the way in which it is enacted in embodied, aesthetic encounters with other conscious beings, human and nonhuman alike.

In the Jain tradition, the nonhuman, though positioned across the divide from the human, can never be rendered an object since nonhuman subjectivities are taken for granted. And the impetus to preserve life and avoid suffering is, for Jainism, basic to all living beings and represents the very starting point of its soul-centric philosophy, which articulates a path of reverence for all life-forms. Clearly the Jain human/nonhuman distinction bears little resemblance to the dissociative human/animal binary that underpins the contemporary society with its relentless instrumentalization and objectification of life. Instead, it works against such a view. The exceptionalism it claims for humans is weak and conditional, and its ethic of reverence for life is strong and absolute. All souls are equal, though variously advantaged and disadvantaged in the cycle of birth and death. Although Jainism does not locate the human along an “animal continuum”—a conceptualization widely advocated within Critical Animal Studies (Best, 2009; Haraway, 2008; Wolfe, 2010; Sorensen, 2014; for a contrary view, see Weisberg, 2004)—it does treat the human, and all living beings, as existing along a continuum of conscious embodied life. Human uniqueness, in other words, is treated as immanent to, not transcendent of, embodied, sentient life.

Ethical reflection ultimately derives from embodied consciousness, a condition shared by all life. It is as decisive for spiritual growth as is the capacity for

self-transcendence, which humans are said to uniquely possess. The shared substrate of conscious, suffering existence is the prerequisite for both the fraternal solidarity and engagement with life, as it is for the ultimate escape from it. “Souls render service to one another” (parasaparopagraho jivanam [Tatia, Trans., *Tattvartha Sutra*; Umasvati, n.d./2002, 5.21]) declares an aphorism often used to encapsulate Jainism.

We return once again to the story with which we began, namely that of Prince Nemi Kumar, and recall that it was compassion, not reason, that was the decisive catalyst for his liberation. Prince Nemi Kumar’s spiritual awakening was roused through a primordial connection with beings who, like him, suffer and die—in particular, through a confrontation with the suffering of animals. The vulnerability of other living beings ignited his compassion, gave rise to his reflections on the nature of existence, and ultimately led to his freedom.

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