VULNERABLITY & TRANSCENDENCE: THE HUMAN-ANIMAL DIVIDE WITHIN JAINISM

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Preamble:

In August of 2015 the High Court of Rajasthan upheld a litigation, filed in 2006, to have the Jain practice of voluntary death (sallêkhâna) declared a form suicide. Jains throughout India and abroad quickly and massively mobilized to condemn the ruling, insisting that it was based on ignorance of the Jain tradition. They argued that whereas suicide marks a submission to the body and its passions (and is thereby a "foolish death"), the Jain ritual of sallêkhâna is its inverse: it marks the dispassionate triumph of the soul over the body, is the ultimate expression of nonviolence, and is the most humane, and human, of all acts. Within the same month (August 31) the Supreme Court of India ruled in the Jains' favour, and restored the practice of sallêkhâna to legality. The self-willed, fully conscious death is an ideal in the Jain tradition and treated as the ultimate expression of human spiritual achievement. Its centrality in the Jain understanding of the ideal human life makes it a fertile lens through which to explore "the animal" in Jain thought.

VIGNETTE

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 clamour 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. 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.

PROBLEMATIC:

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 animal subjectivities as participating in shared existential ground. Prince Nemi Kumar's spiritual awakening[1] did not emerge from study, meditation, or ethical reasoning; it did not arise from analytical argument or from any deployment of rational, conceptual

[1] which eventually leads him to liberation, referred to as "moksha" within Jainism.

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 that of *human* suffering, such as that which initiated the Buddha's awakening[2], 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[3] — a cosmic event of inestimable importance for Jains — was generated by the vulnerability that he *shared with animals*[4]. Compassion, not reason, was the decisive catalyst for Nemi Kumar's liberation, and it arose not from a detached mind, but from a primordial vulnerability with beings who, like him, suffer and die.

Clearly, the category of the "animal" in Jain thought does not serve as the root antitype of the "human" *in the way it does* for philosophical, religious and common sense thought in the western tradition. Jainism is renowned for its intricate ethical code that extends far beyond the human, and its complex catalogue of beings, some so small as to be invisible to the human eye but who are nonetheless important players in the drama of life and liberation. The animal - or more accurately, the nonhuman - plays a role of immeasurable importance in Jainism, the degree to which is astonishing in comparison with most other traditions. Jainism's philosophy, ethics, social origin myths, rituals, every-day practices, creative cultural imaginings, and ascetic ideal are all inescapably grounded in an engagement with a world animated by sentient, conscious nonhuman others.

And yet despite all this, the Jain tradition does not deny the uniqueness of human subjectivity, nor does it do away with a human/animal binary — judged by Post humanism and (much of) Critical Animal Studies to be the

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[2] Namely from three of Four Sights: illness, old age, and death

[3] after which he is referred to as Lord Neminath

[4] Unlike in the history of Western philosophy, where the body is conceived as "animal" and, as such, is treated as philosophically and theologically unimportant, in Jainism the sentient body is what makes samyak darsan (insight) possible. As such, the subjectivity of animal bodies is never denied in Jain thought.

scourge of the Western tradition[5], and the source of the systematic and monstrous violence it inflicts on real animals — and on all who can be animalized[6] (for instance, animalization is seen as a strategy at work underpinning of the social evils of racism, antisemitism, sexism, even ageism).

Despite Jainism's ethical inclusivism, it holds steadfast to the idea that human beings occupy a place of ontological privilege; a place that makes ethical reflection possible, and from which ultimate spiritual release is attained. The human capacity for self-transcendence is, for Jains, unique among all beings in the cosmos. Though nonhuman animals are held to be conscious interlocutors in the drama of life, they are not (except under rare circumstances[7]) conscious *of being conscious*. We alone are beings for whom *being* itself is a 'problem'; for whom our embodied existence can become an 'object' of reflection. What Heidegger calls "ex-sisting" (from ex-sistere, standing outside oneself) is, for Jains, that crucial capacity without which we cannot come to treat the body as 'other'. It is this capacity for self-transcendence that lies at the heart of Jainism's renowned ethic of nonviolence and its rigorous ascetic practices. It reaches its acme in the final act of voluntary death (*sallêkhâna*) where the body becomes a 'thing' to dispense with.

The voluntary, fully conscious ritual of *sallêkhâna* is celebrated in Jainism as the wisest of all deaths[8]. It marks an apotheosis of renunciation and nonviolence, as well as representing the *most* human of all human acts — since humans alone have the ability to voluntarily renounce their bodies and embrace death.

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[5] From Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, "humanity" is located in soul/reason/language and in opposition to the body/ "animality" .

[6] And who cannot be animalized? Animalization is among the most common strategies of disparagement and social exclusion. This is a key idea behind Giorgio Agamben's concept of "anthropogenesis", which he argues is a violent mechanism which produces "the human" through a disavowal of "the animal".

[7] And only in the presence of a Jina (prophet)

[8] 47 less ideal types are catalogued.

That the Jain tradition evinces a robust anthropocentrism alongside an equally robust ethic of reverence for life seems paradoxical. But from the Jain perspective, in sharp contradistinction to much Post humanist and Critical Animal Studies, anthropocentrism and reverence-for-life go hand in hand. This essay endeavours to take this perspective seriously and explore its logic through an analysis of the Jain practice of *sallêkhâna*.

BACKGROUND TO THE JAIN TRADITION

Jains take their name, and inspiration, from the Jinas, those dispassionate bringers of Truth who escaped the cycle rebirth, attained spiritual perfection, and taught the path of freedom to others. "Jina" technically means "conqueror" and is an epithet used to describe those who prevailed over the passions and egotism or "I" that bind us to this world. The most recent of the Jinas was Mahavira, or "Great Hero", who lived about 2600 years ago in North East India. 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. Jinas will come again, but not for at least another 80 000 years[9]. The historical record confirms the existence of the ascetic teacher Mahavira, but he is no more real to Jains for this than are any of the other Jinas for whom historical evidence is slim or non-existent.[10]

Although many Jains focus their devotion on a particular Jina, collectively they serve as beacons of hope. Though venerated as "gods[11]", they were born human, and knew the experience of suffering. But through nonviolence and compassion, they found a way to spiritual perfection, and now stand as symbols of triumph and possibility.

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[9] Jinas only appear during particular epochs (the 3rd and 4th of the declining cycle, and 9th and 10th of the inclining cycle.

[10] Some evidence exists for the existence of Parshvanath, the 23rd Jina, said to have lived in the 9th bce.

[11] Incarnation as a divine being (god or goddess) is a temporary state resulting from auspicious karma acquired in a previous birth.

The early mendicant community, comprising of both nuns and monks, revolved around the charismatic leadership of the Jina Mahavira. The *nigganthas* ("unattached", "without knots") as they were then called, led austere lives centred on purifying their souls of the "knots" of karma through such ascetic practices as celibacy, vegetarianism and extensive fasting. These practices which aimed at spiritual purification, were also motivated by compassion born of a recognition of universal existential suffering. The teachings of the Jina, preserved today in the earliest scripture, the Âcârânga Sûtra, reveal a profound degree of sensitivity to the sufferings of embodied existence, and express a striking solidarity with all life. The Âcârânga Sûtra. states:

> . . . as sorrow or pain is not desirable to you, so it is to all which breath, exist, live or have any essence of life. To you and all, it is undesirable, and painful, and repugnant.
>
> That which you consider worth destroying is (like) yourself. That which you consider worth disciplining is (like) yourself. That which you consider worth subjugating is (like) yourself.That which you consider worth killing is (like) yourself.
>
> The result of actions by you has to be borne by you, so do not destroy anything. (in Bothra 1988: iv)

The extraordinary priority placed by Mahavira on nonviolence as the key to salvation distinguished his teachings from the other world renouncing traditions of ancient India. Avoiding harm to the panoply of living beings informed the austere ascetic practices by which Jain mendicants became renowned.

The path of detachment and compassion that the Jina prescribed purified the *jiva* (eternal, immaterial essence; soul) of all its deleterious karma, and paved the way for its eventual release. But it did more than guarantee eternal bliss at some future time; it also had the power to draw in an abundance of good karma, here and now, as a propitious byproduct of nonviolent detachment. This was an advantage missed by few. The ascetics, because of their practices, became spiritually powerful and, over and above the good karma that spontaneously flowed to them, the gods in the heavenly abodes showered them with boons as a way of honouring their

path. The householders who supported the mendicants benefited too: good karma mechanically flowed to them for their generosity. In time, a permanent householder path became established. Modelled on mendicancy, it adapted the mendicant vows to lay life. For example, whereas contemporary ascetics observe vows of total non-violence and celibacy, lay Jains prohibit all unnecessary violence and practice sexual restraint. The mendicant-led community grew and attracted the patronage of local emperors. Soon, the community expanded and flourished well beyond its place of origin in North East India.

About a thousand years after the death of Mahavira, Jainism eventually lost its royal patronage to such rival traditions as Buddhism and Shaivism, and its once powerful presence felt throughout India began to wane. Ultimately, it retreated to the north-west and south-west of India, a geographical settlement pattern that remains largely intact today. The early association of world renunciation with worldly boons has been retained. In India the Jains are as well known for their financial successes as they are for their naked mendicants, their magnificent temples and their dietary restrictions. What appears as paradoxical to many outsiders makes perfect sense to Jains themselves: the path of nonviolence is one of limitless bounty.

Reflections on the non-human have also always remained a central preoccupation for the Jain tradition. Despite a rhetoric of detachment and aloneness, and a focus on nonviolence and rigorous asceticism, Jains understand themselves to be utterly enmeshed in a tangle of conscious life. It is precisely because the cosmos is so congested with disorderly life that Jainism valorizes self-discipline, and glorifies those who embody it.

HUMAN BIRTH: THE ENVY OF THE COSMOS

Although the tradition of Jainism espouses a deep reverence for life, and focuses on the shared substrate of existence that underpins all living beings, ordinary Jains — householders and renouncers alike — routinely declare, "In

the absence of restraint, human beings are no better than animals" [12] — a maxim that would not sound out of place in the strongly anthropocentric Western philosophical and religious tradition, but begs clarification when found within a tradition that boasts ontological egalitarianism.

That Jainism combines a kind of 'conditional anthropocentrism' with an 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. But 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. Vulnerability and finitude of flesh unite all sentient life and give rise to compassion, but humans alone are capable of treating embodied life as an object of ethical reflection and detachment. An aphorism that is often used to encapsulate Jainism, states "*parasaparopagraho jivanam*[13]" or "souls render service to one another"[14], reflecting an ideal of receptivity that goes beyond empathy or fellow feeling (which Jains claim is found widely among *samsaric* beings) to become, among humans, a call for ethical responsibility.

Importantly, the call of ethical responsibility can only emerge from within a self-aware being. Consciousness (*cetana*) is a property of the soul, and since all living beings possess soul, all possess consciousness - though in most life forms this capacity lies dormant. In other words, even though the inherent capacities of the soul are equally shared by sentient life, their manifestation (*upayoga*) varies. So, whereas nearly all living beings possess some degree of awareness, defined as the ability to perceive sense data and formulate basic subjective ideas, most neither understand nor reflect on their experiences. Only beings with *manah* (mind), sometimes called "self-

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[12] आहारनिद्राभयमैथुनं च सामान्यमेतत पशुभिर्नराणाम
धर्मो हि तेषामधिको विशेषः धर्मेण हीना पशुभिर्समाना

[13] परस्परोपग्रहो जीवानाम्

[14] Tattvārtha Sūtra [5.21]. It is translated as "Souls render service to one another".[1] It is also translated as, "All life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence."[2]

reflection" or a "6th sense"[15] have the potential to fully awaken the inherent capacities of the soul. This god-like capacity of self-reflection allows those who possess it to gain enough purchase to preside over, and in some small measure, direct life. Like that of the Hindu god Brahma, who emerges from the navel of the sleeping Vishnu and awakens him before proceeding to create the world, the mind emerges from the unmindful body to awaken it to a new reality. But importantly, Jainism treats the mind as *derivative* of the body, never independent of it —-an important distinction from the Cartesian legacy which has, in many of its iterations, produced a pathological mind/body state of dissociation. Like Brahma severing the umbilical cord to Vishnu, a mind removed from its source of nourishment can only atrophy. Indeed it is such an atrophied dissociative binary that underpins modernity's relentless instrumentalization of life.

The capacity for self-objectification or self-transcendence is celebrated because it provides us with the vantage point of an observer. Self-transcendence is the source of our creativity and discernment and, crucially, our knowledge of what constitutes an ethical life. 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 (the fate of animals, according to Jains).

In sum, it is the human capacity to objectify the body that is the source of both ethical reflection and worldly release. For this reason, human birth is a cherished possession; for no matter how karmically encumbered a living being may be (e.g., even rocks possess a life-force), the *jiva* yearns for release. It is said that even the gods look down longingly upon humans from their celestial abodes. Only humans have this capacity to treat life as an occasion for spiritual growth, and for this, they are the envy of the cosmos.

[15] Or sometimes called an "anindriya" which means no-sense. It refers to the idea that, unlike other senses, the mind is not dependent on the senses.

Of the 8,400,000 different species that Jainism claims inhabit the universe[16], 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 *tiryañca*). The human stands alone and distinct before the *"tiryañca"* - a category that subsumes and homogenizes such a motley that it makes the Western human/animal divide appear nuanced.

The human *gati* is singled out as unique in the whole of the cosmos because it alone has the capacity for self-objectification; it alone can observe the embodied self and force it to act in accordance with principles that are quite alien to the body and *its* way of being in the world. For most living beings, humans included, the life-force is powerfully dominated by the karma-generated body and its desires (most especially for food and sex) and, if it were not for the rare and precious capacity for self-objectification, it would be condemned to an endless cycle of birth and death.

The capacity for rational self-legislation is what makes humans unique, and human exceptionalism resides in its demonstration, through ethical practices as well as those of bodily detachment (most quintessentially that of voluntary death). But, crucially, self-legislation is *not* the source of moral worth —- the latter is an intrinsically held quality of the *jiva* within the Jain tradition. This is an important factor in the dualist ontology of Jainism, without which the gulf separating the human from the nonhuman would be categorical, and closer to that of the Western Kantian tradition. Human dignity for Kant refers to the inviolable moral worth of human beings in virtue of their capacity for rational autonomy, which arises from an "inner moral law" that humans alone possess,[17]. In the contemporary metaphysically-eliminationist moment, where the dualism of mind/body has become difficult to sustain, and the Kantian postulates of practical reason in support of God and soul are less persuasive, dignity has become more closely associated with bodily integrity; human autonomy is now attributed to the marvels of the human brain. We can see this very clearly in the pro-euthanasia / "Death with Dignity" movement which equates dignity with bodily control and

[16] According to Umasvati's Tatthavârta Sûtra

[17] even if it can never be proved through reason

well-being. Today, those who reject the equation of dignity with bodily integrity have, nevertheless, difficulty in identifying the source of moral worth within a secular discourse, and typically do so by demarcating the human from the non-human. Medical ethicist's Sylvia Stolberg's comment is representative:

"The history of the concept of human dignity suggests a common commitment to the view that human beings are different from animals and tractors, and that recognizing their dignity requires doing something more than merely preserving their well-being and oiling their engines" (2014: 259)

Like Kant (and the Western tradition more broadly), Jainism puts a premium on self-legislation and bodily mastery, which it too considers to be derived from an inner moral law that is a uniquely human endowment. Jains would agree with Kant when he declares that the moral law within "infinitely elevates my worth as an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world"[18]

There is no getting around Jain anthropocentrism and the ontological dualism upon which it rests. But in sharp contradistinction to the Kantian / Western tradition, moral worth for Jains is distinguishable from self-mastery; it is said to reside in a life-force that all living beings possess. In Jainism, the body may, at times, be an affront to self-control and discipline, but not to moral worth —the latter being an inviolable condition of life.

Nevertheless, bodily discipline is of paramount importance within the renunciatory tradition of Jainism because it demonstrates, and effectuates, mastery of the *jiva* over the body. For this reason, the undisciplined body (i.e., a body given free rein to express its inexhaustible desires) is shameful and, indeed, derided as "animal like". But because the body is ultimately distinct from the *jiva/soul*, and follows its own laws, there are limits to its ability to be controlled. When the body declines and falters of its own accord, the *jiva* is not at fault, nor is it shamed. The aging, dying body is an index of nothing beyond *samsaric* embodied existence, and therefore does nothing to rob the self of dignity. Moreover, for human beings, the declining body offers

[18] Kant. The Critique of Practical Reason. Trans. Abbott, London 1889; p 260

one final opportunity for spiritual growth. Consciously and dispassionately abandoning one's own body is to effectively demonstrate one's independence of it. And no living being, other than the human, possesses such a degree of self-mastery.

DEATH AS CRADLE OF HUMANITY

> Mrs Kumar[19] was at the end of a piously-lived life. Mother to three and grandmother to seven, her long life had been blessed. Throughout her married life, she and her husband regularly attended the same local mandir, and her frequent and arduous fasting was legendary in her community. But now, at 77 years old, and ill with a degenerative disease, she was on the last fast. She always wanted to end her life the way she had lived it; with equanimity and nonviolence so when she requested her family, and then the *acharya*, for permission to take the vow of *sallêkhâna (a ritual fast to death)*, she was granted it. When I met her in her Mumbai apartment, she would have less than a week to live. She was not speaking anymore, and spent most of her time in light sleep. She lay directly on the floor, on a mat near the front of her apartment. A large number of people were present, and seemed to be taking turns chanting the *namokar mantra* so that she was never outside of its protective grace. The notice of her fast had appeared in the local community newspaper, so many had come to receive her *darshan*. The family expressed pride in her courageous decision to undertake such a prestigious death. When I enquired after her wellbeing - whether she was in any pain - I was immediately informed of the help that she was receiving from the gods, many of whom also came for her darshan. The magnificent fragrance that periodically enveloped the room was a signifier of the presence of the gods that all could affirm. And a young man (Mrs Kumar's grandson) invited me to observe that Mrs Kumar, though she had abandoned her body, appeared fresh and groomed. He explained that the gods were keeping her comfortable with "celestial baths".

To say that Jainism treats the confrontation with death as the crucible out of which the human is created does not go far enough. A legion of others from Plato, Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, James, Heidegger, Unamuno, Marcel, Becker — to mention just a few

[19] Name has been changed. Based on ethnographic work in 2014.

luminaries of the Western tradition alone, treat the awareness of finitude as the defining feature of being human. For Jains, the human is not just a being for whom life is a project with a definite end (as a "being toward death" in Heidegger's formulation) but a being for whom the event of death is an opportunity for spiritual growth.

There is no better way to demonstrate the absolute autonomy of the soul than by voluntarily, and permanently, severing its connection with the body. Humans alone have the ability to do this by treating the body as "other". All animals (and many humans) cling to embodied existence, mistaking the body for life itself. And for this reason, they die passively, usually reluctantly. Death *happens* to them. The capacity to assume a position of detachment vis à vis one's embodied existence is a necessary condition for spiritual growth, and it is one that humans alone possess. For this, the human is honoured by all, gods included.

For Jains, all sentient life possesses consciousness and evinces a utilitarian calculus that seeks pleasure and avoids pain. But consciousness of one's own mortality requires a capacity for self-objectification that is far more radical; it requires a capacity for the objectification of *being* itself. The vast majority of living beings lack this, and therefore make the fatal flaw of equating embodied existence with life itself, dooming themselves to a ceaseless existence in the cycle of birth and death.

The human ability to dispassionately embrace death is the apogee of self-transcendence and the single most powerful act demarcating the human from the nonhuman. For Jains, it - more than anything else - justifies the human / nonhuman divide and the isolation of manushya in its own separate gati.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

The Jain tradition makes abundant use of the human/nonhuman divide, and can be regarded as highly (if not strongly) anthropocentric. And yet the

tradition is also universally recognized for its ethic of reverence for life that extends to all living beings. This should give us pause. Exploring the Jain tradition on its own terms means taking seriously the idea that the human/nonhuman dualism, in and of itself, is neither intrinsically problematic nor completely avoidable. Of course, Jain dualism bears little resemblance to the dissociative human/animal binary that underpins the modern western materialist ontology with its relentless instrumentalization of life.

Jainism recognizes the impetus to avoid suffering and preserve life as basic to all living beings. The tradition's renowned compassion toward nonhuman animals is derived from the vulnerability and finitude we share with them. Nevertheless, Jainism treats the ontological condition of being human as unique because self preservation —for humans alone— can come at the expense of bodily integrity. In other words, the human capacity for voluntary death reveals, more than any other single act, a conception of the Self as distinct from the body. It is for this reason, the tradition boasts a "celebration of death", because the capacity for radical bodily detachment is what makes us fully human. In Jainism, death, or finitude, both unites the human with, and distinguishes it from, the nonhuman.

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