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Description of Module

Subject Name	Philosophy
Paper Name	Ethics-1
Module Name/Title	4.36
Module Id	Jainism I: Metaethics
Pre-requisites	4.2 The Scope of Moral Philosophy
Objectives	Become Familiarized with Jain Metaethics
Keywords	*Ahiṃsā, Śramaṇa* , *virtue theory*, ethics, karma, *jīva*

Jainism I: Metaethics

1. Introduction

Jainism is one of the world's oldest surviving philosophical schools. Jains continue to be a notable portion of India's population. In this module, we shall examine the early Jain arguments as contributions to moral philosophy. This examination will proceed in two steps. First, we shall review Jain metaethics. Metaethics is that aspect of moral philosophy where questions of the right and good are addressed conceptually. Here, we find basic ideas of the right and the good flushed out for their abstract relations. In the next module, we shall review Jainism's contribution to Normative and Applied Ethics. Normative ethics concerns the practical resolution of questions of the right and the good, whereas Applied Ethics concerns the *case-based* account of the right and the good.

In this module, we shall, in the next section, address the question of the points of convergence between early Buddhist and Jain doctrine. This leads to a review of Jainism's distinct philosophical thesis: the essence of the self is virtue. In the fourth section, we shall review the implications of this radical Virtue Theory: action is a confusion, and morality (dharma) is movement away from activity. In the fifth section, we shall wrap up with observations in support of this argument: the primary virtue is not doing, for virtue is not the same as action, but our dispositions towards actions. We should, hence, strive to be virtuous. Death as a consequence of not doing is an important consequence of this moral theory.

2. The Ancient Philosophical World of the Jains

It is sometimes useful to explicate a school's views by contrast. In this respect, Jainism is a colourful contrast to the philosophies of the ancient Indian landscape. The ancient texts of the Buddhist and Jain traditions show that there were a number of philosophical teachers attempting to persuade people to follow them. These teachers were in the *Śramaṇa* camp – the group of philosophers who left society to provide a critical and dissenting approach to the purpose of life. This group contrasted with the Brahminical philosophers, who in general, approved of the social order of their world.

Śramaṇa philosophers were many. Some were unsavoury. In the Pali Canon, we find four such figures mentioned:

- Ajita Kesakambali
- Pūraṇa Kassapa
- Pakudha Kaccāyana and
- Makkhali Gosāla

Ajita Kesakambali was a soteriological nihilist and materialist (DN 1.55). Pūraṇa Kassapa, in contrast was a moral nihilist, who claimed that:

> If with a discus with an edge sharp as a razor ... [one] should make all the living creatures on the earth one heap, one mass of flesh ... [if one were] to go along the south bank of the Ganges striking and slaying, mutilating and having men mutilated, oppressing and having men oppressed, there would be no guilt thence resulting: no increase of guilt would ensue. (DN 1.52)

Pakudha Kaccāyana was anti realist about persons but a realist about mater: "[w]hen Pakudha Kaccāyana one with a sharp sword cleaves a head in twain, no one thereby deprives anyone of life: a sword has only penetrated into the interval between seven elementary substances" (*Dīgha-Nikāya*, 1.56). Finally, there was Makkhali Gosāla, the leader of a now extinct ascetic order called the "Ājīvakas." They believed that while there was a difference between right and wrong, we were ultimately powerless: reality is sheer determination with no room for moral freedom. We are all simply victims of fate with no freedom to alter or change our lives. (*Dīgha-Nikāya*, 1.54).

The problem with these views, according to the Jain philosopher, Mahāvīra, is that these views deny the reality of action. Actions are real. They have effects, and persons can and do act. Those who know this affirm the following:

> Misery is produced by one's own works, not by those of somebody else (viz. fate, creator, &c.). But right knowledge and conduct lead to liberation … The (Tīrthaṅkaras [Path Makers]) being (as it were) the eyes of the world and its leaders, teach the path which is salutary to men; they have declared that the world is eternal inasmuch as creatures are (forever) living in it … Averse to injury of living beings, they do not act, nor cause others to act. Always restraining themselves, those pious men practice control, and some become heroes through their knowledge. He regards small beings and large beings, the whole world, as equal to himself; he comprehends the immense world, and being awakened he controls himself among the careless. Those who have learned (the truth) by themselves or from others are able (to save) themselves and others. One should always honour a man who is like a light and makes manifest the Law (Dharma) after having well considered it. He who knows himself and the world; who knows where (the creatures) go, and whence they will not return; who knows what is eternal, and what is transient; birth and death, and the future existences of men: He who knows the tortures of beings below (i.e. in hell); who knows the influx of sin and its stoppage: who knows misery and its annihilation, he is entitled to expound the Kriyāvāda [doctrine of action]. (*Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, I.xii.11-21)

3. Essence of the Self as Virtue

The Buddha was a contemporary of Mahāvīra, the leading philosopher of the ancient Jain tradition. Both agreed that the anti-realists were incorrect: action is real, and its consequences can be good or bad. Hence, they rejected the anti-realist arguments in ethics. Correlatively, they made room for moral freedom. In the case of the Buddhists, moral freedom comes at the cost of a personal self, the kind of thing that continues on in the same state forever. We are free, which means that we make ourselves as we choose. Our choices result in a future that is ours. This is karma.

Moral character in this account does not play a primary role in explanation. We can speak of our mind as our character. But it is a function of our choices.

The Jain approach to securing our freedom was to argue, instead, that we have a personal essence. This is virtue: *vīrya*. *Vīrya* is the essence all selves – things that are living, or *jīvas*. Virtue Theory entails that our right actions are caused by our virtue. In the case of Jain moral theory, moral action is treated as a function or consequence of our character. But the Jain tradition treats action as moral in proportion to its conformity to virtue. Virtue, for its part, is characterised by non-harmfulness. Indeed, as virtue is merely a trait of the character and not an action, it is non-harmful in itself. The ideal of action, hence, is to mirror this *ahiṃsā* of the self.

Moral freedom is what we have by virtue of our intrinsic virtue. Right and wrong action is a matter of conformity or deviation from virtue. All of this has to do with the essential traits of the individual: "A *jīva* is said to have three main qualities *(guṇa)* or functional aspects: consciousness *(caitanya),* bliss *(sukha),* and virtue *(vīrya)*" (Jaini 1979: 102–6). Ethical freedom respects these intrinsic characteristics, and ethical non-freedom, or tyranny, does not. Hence, to promote ethical freedom, we have to act in a manner that is respectful of our intrinsic characteristics.

Here is a list from the central Jain philosopher Mahavira of forbidden actions:

> 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 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. the recommended deed in following prescribed action, e.g. for the welfare of his *jīva* by being careful in speech, thinking, walking, standing and eating. (Mahāvīra 2004, 51–58)

4. Action as Confusion of Priority

Virtue ethics is the view that good states produce or cause right behaviour. The Jain theory of dharma as ethical movement, unhindered by obstructions to the *jīva's* intrinsic virtue, is an Indian account of virtue ethics. In the Jain account, the intrinsic virtue (*vīrya*) of the *jīva* is what yields good conduct. As noted in the previous section, the metaphysics of the *jīva* is the normative virtue ethics of the Jain.

But there is a complicating factor: karma. What do we do with activity? Ideally, activity must be subordinate to the self and its virtue. Then, the self is not defined by karma. However, when an individual does not have this discriminative knowledge and lives as someone defined by what they do, they come to understand themselves in terms of their activity. This constitutes an influx of a static material into the individual, which ties him down.

The usual descriptions in the Jain literature of karma being a kind of matter that sticks to the individual are vivid. It is easy to get swept away by the imagery. But we must keep in mind the

basic moral theory: virtue takes priority over action. Hence, for karma to be a matter that covers the individual is for action to be something that clouds the self's presentation. The problem with this is that it inverts proper, ethical understanding with the consequences of the self. This leads to understanding life in terms of action and causality and the result is violence and oppression, geared towards changing the world. To reverse this, we must give the virtue of the self priority. This shift and change from karma defining the self to the self presenting itself unencumbered is a movement from the stasis of action.

Dharma is, hence, understood as the Principle of Motion, according to the Jains.

It is an old view that *dharma* and *adharma*, the principles of motion and rest, seem to be particularly Jaina technical concepts and connote the mediums through which movement and rest can occur – *dharma* in the sense of "law" and "righteousness" is found in other contexts (Jaini 1979: 97–102). Yet, given that the ethical problem in the Jain account is characterised by inertia brought about by an excess of karma that inhibits the *jīva*'s innate virtue, these uses of "dharma" and "adharma" to describe movement and stillness describe the moral theory of the Jains relative to the twin limits of virtue and action. Indeed, as virtue is a *disposition*, and as dispositions move us, identifying dharma with motion is consistent with Jain Virtue Theory.

4.1.Normative implications: non-interference

The substantive implication in this is that ethics is about non-interference. To make this idea clear, we can consider several cases in which a dilemma appears to arise. One is the case of euthanasia. If an individual is dying and is sick, a utilitarian consequentialist might argue that the kind and ethical thing to do is to put them out of their misery. A deontologist might reject this, if euthanasia fails to be one of the rights of an individual. The Jain Virtue Theory implies that action must be in conformity. But virtue itself is not an action. It causes, at most, action, not consequences. Action in conformity to virtue hence have no effects on others. Hence, euthanasia as an intervention would be ruled out as it aims to bring about a consequence for another.

What about the first person case? Here, the Jains draw a distinction between suicide and merely dying. This distinction mirrors the philosophical distinction between killing and letting die. Jains draw a distinction between killing and letting die for the latter is not in conformity with the harmlessness of virtue, while the latter is. Similarly in the first person case, the appropriate thing to do is not to kill oneself. Rather, once all familial duties have been discharged, a Jain ascetic or someone who has gotten the appropriate permission from a teacher may take the vow sometimes called *sallekhana.* This consists in relying upon virtue and not on action. The result is death, but death is not the goal. Not acting is rather what is chosen as a means to act in conformity to one's virtue. As virtue is not an action, action in conformity to virtue is non-interfering (for more on this, see Soni Forthcoming).

5. Non Action as Virtue

The range of beings to whom we owe ethical concern is wide in the Jain account:

> Earth-lives are individual beings, so are water-lives, fire-lives, and wind-lives; grass, trees, corn; ... A wise man should study them with all means of philosophical research. All beings hate pain; therefore one should not kill them.; This is the quintessence of wisdom: not to kill anything. Know this to be the legitimate conclusion from the principle of the reciprocity with regard to nonkilling. He should cease to injure living beings whether they move or not, on high, below, and on earth. For this has been called the "Nirvana"; which consists in peace. (*Sutrakritanga* I.xi.7–10)

In this account, there are plants too that we must consider carefully when we take ethics into consideration. Hence, moral choice is not merely about the human community, but the wider community of living things. What is it that distinguish the living things from the non-living things? A living thing is a *jīva* and *jīvas* display a few characteristics as noted. Virtue is one of them. Virtue is the characteristic of an individual that leads to ethical choice, but ethical choice consists in large measure of restraint and not interfering with the rights of others. In this score, many plants display virtue too as they do not interfere with the life of other living things.

Jain moral philosophy is, hence, a striking contrast to the ethics we are accustomed to. Most ethical theories that survive prioritise humans, and regard non-human animals as means to human ends. Most surviving ethical theories are also not virtue theoretic. Among moral theories that take animals seriously, Jainsim stands out as the virtue theoretic option. One might take a deontological approach, and argue that non-humans have rights. This would be to take a position akin to the Jain view. One might correlatively argue that non-human animals must be considered because they can suffer. Certainly, Jains talk like this. But for a utilitarian, suffering or the ability to experience happiness can be key determinants in ethical choice. For the consequentialist, such as Bentham, for instance, the rightness or wrongness of an action has to do with whether it is justified by utility: if an action minimises pain or maximises pleasure, it should be chosen. Notice how different this is from the Jain view. In the Jain view, the right thing to do is not to minimise pain or maximise pleasure. Rather, the right thing to do is to avoid harming individuals, or *jīvas*. The reason that that Jain position takes this approach is that Jainism grounds ethics in the characteristic strength of the individual to be above all action. Hence, activity that interferes with the welfare of another individual would be unnecessary action, not inconformity with virtue. But if virtue here constitutes the justification for an action, we have in Jainism consequentialist justification of choice, where the good (the virtue) is the reason for a choice. This is an unusual form of consequentialism.

Jainsim hence appears at its most basic level as a Virtue Theory, but consequentialist in so far as the virtues – states of goodness – provides the justification for action. We can understand the rules and rights of individuals that Jain philosophers allude to as the basis of ethical reasoning, but this would be a superficial analysis.

The interesting contrast that Jainsim warrants is with Yoga. Later Jain philosophers, such as Umasvati, were very influenced by Jain philosophy. Yoga too seeks to isolate the individual from the influence of external factors. The Jain idea that our actions should be in conformity with our virtue mirrors yoga. There are more similarities too. Jainism is thought to have developed the *Mahāvratas* or "Great Vows" (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, II.15.i.1 – v.1). We find this in *Yoga Sūtra* II.30. According to these basic vows, we must aim for five ideals: abstaining from harm (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), abstinence from theft (*asteya*), sexual restraint (*brahmacarya*) and unacquisitiveness (*aparigraha*). According to the ancient Jain texts, the Jain

leader Pārśva only recognised four of these vows. Mahāvīra is said to have added sexual restraint to the list (*Uttaradhyayana*, XXIII.12). The list is extremely influential in Indian philosophy. It shows up also in the *Nyāya-bhāṣya* (Nyāya Commentary) in the Nyāya *Sūtra* 4.2-46.

What then are the differences between Yoga and Jainism? The chief difference is that Yoga is the Bhakti theory of ethics. Accordingly, the right thing to do is to emulate a regulative ideal – the Lord – and the outcome is the perfection of this emulation: kaivalya, isolation. Bhakti is a version of proceduralism. All proceduralism holds that the right (action) takes explanatory priority over the good (outcome). Deontologists, as proceduralists, regard the right as taking priority over the good, in so far as right actions on their account cannot be justified by the good, but on procedural grounds. Bhakti holds that the right causes the good, and that the right is defined by devotion to a regulative ideal. Jainism, in contrast, is a version of teleology, which holds that the good takes explanatory priority over the right. Consequentialists as teleologists hold that the good justifies the right. Virtue theorists as teleologists hold that the good causes the right. Bhakti and Virtue Theory are opposites. The case of Jainism and Yoga is also an interesting contrast. The Jain and the Yogi will act in many ways the same, but will explain their moral theory differently. The Jain, relying upon the intrinsic virtue of the individual as the ultimate test of action, dispenses with the need for a regulative ideal. The individual is as though the ideal, and we merely need to return to this state of unencumbered virtue. The philosophical debate between the two systems hence comes down to the problem of ideals: am I it, or is the ideal always something distinct from me? The Jain view is that you are your own ideal. The only thing that keeps you from seeing that is action.

Glossary

Letter	Term	Definition
D	Dharma	Ethics, morality, described as Motion in the Jain account: motion away from being defined by action.
K	Karma	Action – behaviour defined by a goal.
V	Virtue Theory	The idea that good states *cause* right action

Questions

1. Correct Answer	**1**	According to Jainism, virtue (*vīrya*) is an essential trait of a person.
Correct Answer	True	
	False	
	feedback	

2. Correct Answer	**2**	It is not true that Jain philosophers regard self (*jīva*) as having three characteristics: consciousness, bliss and virtue.
	True	
Correct Answer	False	
	feedback	

3. Correct Answer	**3**	While Jain philosophers believe that karma is a confusion that covers virtue, they reject moral anti realists for they deny the reality of karma.
Correct Answer	True	
	False	
	feedback	

4. Correct Answer	**4**	Virtue Theory is the idea that good states justify right action.
	True	
Correct Answer	False	
	feedback	Virtue Theory holds that good states cause right action.

5. Correct Answer	**5**	The Jain idea that karma sticks to the *jīva* has nothing to do with its Virtue Theory.

	True	
Correct Answer	False	
	feedback	On the contrary: this is a description of the occlusion of virtue.

6. Correct Answer	**6**	Dharma (ethics) is the principle of Motion, according to Jains.
Correct Answer	True	
	False	
	feedback	

7. Correct Answer	**7**	As virtue is a disposition, and as dispositions move us, the identification of virtue with dharma as motion is tautological.
Correct Answer	True	
	False	
	feedback	

8. Correct Answer	**8**	Jains reject the Great Vows of abstaining from harm (ahiṃsā), truthfulness (satya), abstinence from theft (asteya), sexual restraint (brahmacarya) and unacquisitiveness (aparigraha) found in *Yoga Sūtra* II.30.
	True	
Correct Answer	False	
	feedback	Early Jain texts claim that list was completed by Mahāvīra himself, who added sexual restraint to the list developed by the earlier Jain philosopher: Pārśva.

9. Correct Answer	**9**	Yoga and Jainism are mirrors of each other: Yoga is a Bhakti Theory (right action causes good outcomes) and

		Jainism is a Virtue Theory (good outcomes cause right actions).
Correct Answer	True	
	False	
	feedback	

10. Correct Answer	**10**	Immorality cannot be explained by action, but only by virtue.
	True	
Correct Answer	False	
	feedback	Immorality arises by action taking priority over virtue, according to the Jain philosophers.

The following Reading material will be of special help:

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