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Title: Understanding Nonviolence through the eyes of the religion of its origin.

Abstract:
This paper examines the principle of nonviolence by returning to the religious contexts from which it emerged, clarifying how the Jain tradition conceptualises *ahiṃsā* as an active ethical discipline rather than passive pacifism. It explores the nuanced distinction between monastic and lay responsibilities, showing that while monks pursue an uncompromising ideal of non-harm, laypeople engage with a pragmatic, situational ethic grounded in intention and restraint. The paper further interrogates what constitutes violence—physical, verbal, and mental—and argues that religious frameworks view violence not merely as an act but as a state of being shaped by attachment, ignorance, and ego. Finally, it analyses the lived practice of nonviolence, highlighting its transformative aim: to purify the self, cultivate compassion, and contribute to a harmonious social order.

Text:
In everyday discourse, nonviolence is often understood as the refusal to act, to resist, or to intervene. My argument today is that, in the tradition in which nonviolence is perhaps most rigorously developed, this understanding would be largely unrecognisable. Jainism sees non-violence, or *ahiṃsā*, as its soteriological path, practiced by millions around the world.

Jainism is one of the world's oldest living religious traditions, originating in India and traditionally traced through a lineage of enlightened teachers known as *Tīrthaṅkaras*, the 24th and last of whom is Mahāvīra, who lived in the 6th century BCE in modern day Bihar. At its core, Jainism is a rigorous ethical and philosophical system centred on the principle of *ahiṃsā*, or nonviolence, understood as radical respect for all forms of life. Jain thought holds that all living beings possess a soul (*jīva*) and exist within an interdependent moral universe shaped by action, intention, and consequence, articulated through the doctrine of karma. Ethical discipline is therefore directed not only at external action, but also at mental and verbal conduct, with particular attention to intention, restraint, and awareness.

Jainism also distinguishes clearly between the demanding ascetic ideals pursued by monks and nuns and the ethical responsibilities of lay practitioners, offering a sophisticated model of moral realism that balances spiritual aspiration with social life. Beyond its religious dimensions, Jainism has made enduring contributions to philosophy, logic, ecology, and ethics, and continues to offer distinctive insights into contemporary debates on nonviolence, sustainability, pluralism, and human responsibility in a shared world.

What is violence?

Any sustained reflection on nonviolence must begin with a question that appears deceptively simple: **what is violence?** In much contemporary ethical and political discourse, violence is treated as largely self-evident and is most often equated with the use of physical force or the infliction of bodily harm. While this understanding is intuitively persuasive, it significantly narrows the moral horizon within which violence is recognised and evaluated. Nonviolence, in turn, is reduced to the absence of physical injury, armed aggression, or coercion, and is frequently misunderstood as inaction or withdrawal.

The Jain tradition begins from a fundamentally different premise. Rather than locating violence exclusively in outward actions and observable consequences, Jain ethics situates violence within **states of consciousness** — the psychological, moral, and dispositional conditions from which actions, words, and thoughts arise. Violence, from this perspective, is not confined to the moment of physical harm; it is already present wherever conduct is shaped by attachment, anger, pride, greed, fear, or ignorance. The moral seriousness of violence thus precedes and exceeds its external manifestations.

This expanded understanding of violence finds its earliest and most authoritative articulation in the **Ācārāṅga Sūtra**, one of the oldest Jain canonical texts, attributed by modern scholarship to the teachings of **Mahāvīra**. The Ācārāṅga does not approach violence as a marginal ethical issue, but as the foundational problem of moral and spiritual life. It insists repeatedly that all living beings — humans, animals, plants, and even the smallest life forms — are fundamentally alike in their desire to live and to avoid suffering. Ethical obligation is derived not from social contracts or human exceptionalism, but from a shared existential condition common to all life.

A well-known passage of the Ācārāṅga states that all beings are "fond of life, desirous of pleasure, and averse to pain," and that, recognising this, one should neither kill, nor cause others to kill, nor approve of killing. Crucially, however, this injunction is not restricted to overt or intentional acts of physical harm. The text extends ethical scrutiny to **speech, thought, and negligence**, indicating that violence arises wherever carelessness (*pramāda*) governs conduct. Restraint and nonviolence, by contrast, are rooted in awareness (*apramāda*). Violence is therefore not only a matter of what one does, but of how attentively and responsibly one inhabits the world.

Underlying this ethical demand is a distinctive Jain understanding of the soul (*jīva*) and rebirth. According to Jain doctrine, the soul is capable of being reborn in any realm of existence, including all forms of embodied life. As a result, harm inflicted upon any living being is not morally differentiated by species, intelligence, or utility. Sin (*pāpa*), as articulated in the Ācārāṅga, is defined precisely as harm caused to **any** form of life. The moral status of violence does not depend on the victim's proximity to the human or the social; it depends upon the presence of life itself.

From a karmic perspective, **thoughts, words, and deeds are ethically equivalent in their capacity to bind the soul**. Mental violence and verbal violence are therefore not secondary or preparatory to physical violence; they are morally efficacious in themselves. Attachment, aversion, and ignorance generate karmic consequences whether or not they culminate in bodily action. For this reason, Jain ethics places equal emphasis on mental discipline, verbal restraint, and bodily conduct. Nonviolence requires not merely controlled behaviour, but sustained vigilance over intention, attention, and awareness.

This level of discipline demands constant effort. Ethical attentiveness is not assumed to arise spontaneously, nor is it guaranteed by goodwill alone. Nonviolence, in this sense, cannot be understood as passive or merely negative — as the simple avoidance of harm. It requires continuous cultivation, self-regulation, and restraint in thought, speech, and action. *Ahiṃsā* is therefore an active ethical discipline rather than a static moral position.

The attention to carelessness (*pramāda*) articulated in the Ācārāṅga is a critical and often overlooked aspect of Jain ethics. It suggests that violence is not defined solely by deliberate intention or measurable consequence, but by the broader **orientation of awareness** through which one engages with the world. Harm arising from indifference, haste, or inattentiveness remains morally significant even in the absence of malicious intent. Conversely, ethical vigilance seeks to reduce violence not merely by limiting action, but by transforming the internal conditions under which harmful action becomes likely or normalised.

In this respect, Jain thought anticipates and complicates modern debates concerning responsibility and culpability. It refuses the reassuring assumption that moral innocence is preserved simply by avoiding overt wrongdoing. Instead, violence is treated as cumulative and habitual, cultivated through repeated patterns of perception, desire, and response. Violence is therefore less an isolated event than a **mode of being** — a learned and reinforced way of inhabiting the world.

The renowned Jain scholar, the late Paul Dundas, has described this Jain framework as one in which violence is defined primarily in **psychological and intentional terms**, rather than by reference to physical outcomes alone. Within this conceptual architecture, a physically nonviolent act can nonetheless be ethically violent if it is driven by domination, contempt, or attachment. Conversely, an act that causes unavoidable harm may be morally differentiated by the degree of awareness, restraint, proportionality, and necessity involved. Such distinctions do not relativise ethics; rather, they intensify ethical responsibility by relocating it at the deepest level of agency.

This understanding becomes clearer when we examine the manner in which Jain ethical literature classifies violence. Jain texts consistently distinguish between **mental**, **verbal**, and **physical** violence, treating all three as morally consequential. Mental violence includes hostile thoughts, intentions of harm, and affective states that

reinforce ego, hierarchy, and separation. Verbal violence encompasses abusive, deceitful, manipulative, or reckless speech. Physical violence, while the most visible and socially acknowledged, is not necessarily the most ethically decisive. All three forms are interconnected, and physical injury is often regarded as the outward crystallisation of violence that has already taken root internally.

This layered account challenges contemporary assumptions that treat nonviolence primarily as a behavioural ethic. From a Jain perspective, individuals or institutions may dramatically reduce physical harm while remaining deeply invested in mental and verbal forms of violence. Structures of domination, exclusion, or exploitation may operate without overt physical force, yet continue to generate suffering by sustaining conditions of fear, desire, and inequality. Jain ethics therefore resists any definition of nonviolence that relies exclusively on external restraint.

At the same time, Jainism does not deny the moral gravity of physical harm. Rather, it refuses to isolate physical violence from the psychological and cultural conditions that produce and normalise it. Ethical evaluation must account for **degree, context, and constraint**, recognising that embodied existence inevitably entails some level of harm. The moral task is not to achieve an impossible purity, but to minimise violence through increasing awareness, intentional restraint, and disciplined conduct, articulated through practices such as *samiti* (carefulness in action) and *gupti* (restraint of mind, speech, and body).

This framework is essential for understanding why Jainism maintains a clear distinction between **monastic** and **lay** ethical responsibilities. The monastic ideal demands an uncompromising commitment to nonviolence, extending even to one-sensed beings and regulating involuntary harm. This absolute orientation functions as an ethical horizon — a living reminder of what complete nonviolence entails. Lay ethics, by contrast, acknowledges the realities of social, economic, and familial life, permitting limited and regulated harm under conditions of necessity. This is not understood as a dilution of *ahiṃsā*, but as its contextual application.

Rather than collapsing ethics into rigid moral absolutes or pragmatic relativism, Jainism offers a **graduated ethic of responsibility**. Harm is never morally neutral, but it is evaluated in relation to intention, awareness, proportionality, and restraint. This approach prevents nonviolence from being dismissed as either naïve idealism or political impracticality, and it avoids the simplistic binary opposition between violence and nonviolence that characterises much modern debate.

The metaphysical grounding of this ethic is articulated with remarkable concision in the **Tattvārtha Sūtra**, attributed to **Umāsvāti** and composed around the fourth century CE. The well-known aphorism, *parasparopagraho jīvānām* — "living beings exist in mutual interdependence" — provides an ontological foundation for Jain nonviolence. Violence is not merely morally wrong; it is misaligned with the structure of reality itself.

If all living beings exist in relations of mutual dependence, then harm inflicted upon others inevitably reverberates back upon the self. Violence fractures the relational fabric that sustains life, while nonviolence restores harmony within it. This interdependence is not sentimental or metaphorical, but embedded within Jain cosmology and karma theory, according to which every action, intention, and disposition contributes to the binding or loosening of karmic entanglement.

From this perspective, violence is not only destructive of others; it is **self-entangling**. It binds the agent more deeply into cycles of suffering by reinforcing attachment and ignorance. Nonviolence, conversely, functions as a mode of liberation because it weakens these binding forces. The ethical, psychological, and soteriological dimensions of nonviolence cannot be separated without distorting the tradition's central insight.

This helps explain why Jain texts consistently resist framing nonviolence as a strategy for achieving external outcomes alone. Nonviolence is not primarily a means to peace, social harmony, or political reform, even if it may contribute to such ends. It is first a practice of ethical self-formation, aimed at transforming the perceiving, desiring, and acting subject so that violence is not continuously reproduced under new guises.

Such an orientation poses a quiet but profound challenge to contemporary discussions of nonviolence, particularly in contexts of war and systemic conflict. Debates focused exclusively on the legitimacy of force risk overlooking the deeper question of how violence is generated, normalised, and sustained at the level of consciousness and culture. Jain ethics does not offer a geopolitical solution to war, but it provides a diagnostic framework for examining how moral necessity so easily becomes moral permission.

By redefining violence as a condition of being rather than an isolated act, Jainism intensifies ethical responsibility and refuses to allow nonviolence to be reduced to passive restraint or moral symbolism. It is this conceptual reorientation that forms the foundation upon which the Jain principle of *ahiṃsā* must be understood — as an active ethical discipline rooted in awareness, restraint, and relational responsibility — and from which its application within social life can meaningfully be assessed.

Monastic and Lay Ethics: Absolute Orientation and Situated Responsibility

The Jain understanding of violence as a condition of consciousness rather than a discrete act provides the conceptual basis for one of the tradition's most distinctive features: the clear differentiation between **monastic and lay ethical responsibilities**. This distinction is neither accidental nor merely sociological. It reflects a carefully articulated ethical architecture designed to preserve the integrity of *ahiṃsā* while acknowledging the realities of embodied social life.

Jain monastic ethics represent the most uncompromising articulation of nonviolence found in any religious tradition. Monks and nuns undertake vows that demand radical restraint in thought, speech, and bodily action, extending to the smallest forms of life, including one-sensed beings understood to inhabit earth, water, fire, air, and vegetation. This requires meticulous attention to movement, consumption, speech, and occupation in order to minimise even involuntary harm. The monastic path is therefore not presented as a symbolic ideal, but as a practical discipline demanding extraordinary vigilance and sustained self-regulation. Today, Jain monastics following this discipline number in the region of **fifteen thousand**, all based in India.

The ethical function of the monastic ideal is not limited to personal ascetic perfection, although spiritual liberation remains its ultimate aim. More significantly, it serves as a **normative horizon** against which all other forms of conduct are evaluated. By embodying the fullest implications of *ahiṃsā*, monastics keep visible the depth and seriousness of nonviolence as a moral commitment. In this way, monastic ethics prevent nonviolence from being reduced to sentiment, rhetoric, or selective moral preference.

Lay ethics, by contrast, operate within the constraints of social, economic, and familial life. The Jain householder is expected to earn a livelihood, raise a family, participate in civic life, and navigate unavoidable forms of harm inherent to embodied existence. Jainism does not deny these realities, nor does it demand monastic behaviour from those who do not undertake monastic vows. Instead, it articulates a **context-sensitive ethic of restraint**, structured around intention, proportionality, and responsibility.

Whilst monastic ethics remain the ideal of Jain soteriology, there is clear recognition that ethical responsibility varies with circumstance and capacity. What remains constant across both monastic and lay contexts is the orientation toward minimising violence and maximising awareness. The difference lies not in the value accorded to nonviolence, but in the manner of its application.

This framework enables Jain ethics to avoid two common pitfalls in moral reasoning. On the one hand, it resists forms of absolute pacifism detached from lived realities, which risk becoming ethically inert or politically dismissible. On the other hand, it rejects moral relativism, in which necessity becomes a blanket justification for harm. Jainism maintains instead that harm may at times be unavoidable, but it is never ethically neutral.

For this reason, Jain texts consistently emphasise **degrees of violence** rather than a simple binary opposition between violence and nonviolence. Harm is assessed according to intention, awareness, excess, and preventability. Actions driven by negligence, passion, or self-interest carry greater moral weight than those undertaken reluctantly, with restraint and under constraint. This graduated ethic preserves ethical seriousness without denying complexity.

Within this framework, the lay practitioner is not absolved of responsibility by virtue of circumstance. On the contrary, the Jain householder is required to cultivate ongoing awareness of how violence is reproduced through consumption, occupation, speech, and social participation. This includes attention to economic practices, dietary choices, and patterns of desire that indirectly sustain harm. Lay ethics therefore demand moral imagination as well as personal restraint.

The monastic–lay distinction thus functions not as a resolution of ethical tension, but as a **dynamic moral relationship**. The monastic ideal continually interrogates the complacencies of lay life, while lay realities prevent ethical ideals from becoming detached from lived human conditions. Together, they sustain a moral ecology in which *ahiṃsā* remains demanding without becoming paralysing.

This structure is particularly relevant for contemporary discussions of nonviolence in contexts of conflict and war. Jainism neither offers a doctrine of just war nor retreats into moral quietism. Instead, it insists that ethical evaluation must precede strategic calculation. The question is not only whether violence is justified in exceptional circumstances, but how far violence has already been normalised within patterns of thought, desire, and identity.

In this sense, Jain ethics propose a form of moral realism that neither sanctifies violence nor denies constraint. Nonviolence is retained as a **preferential ethical orientation** rather than an absolute rule imposed indiscriminately. This allows Jain thought to remain ethically demanding while engaging seriously with political and social realities, without surrendering its commitment to restraint and responsibility.

Lived Nonviolence and Ethical Transformation

The distinction between monastic and lay ethics ultimately points to a more fundamental claim within Jain thought: nonviolence is not merely a moral rule, political stance, or social strategy, but a **lived discipline of ethical transformation**. *Ahiṃsā* is not exhausted by prescriptions governing outward behaviour; rather, it requires sustained attention to how the self is formed through habitual patterns of perception, desire, and response.

From a Jain perspective, violence persists not only through acts of physical harm, but through the continuous reproduction of attachment, fear, possessiveness, and ego. These inner dispositions shape how individuals relate to others, justify exclusion, and normalise harm. If violence is embedded at the level of consciousness, then nonviolence must address this level directly. It is for this reason that Jain ethics place such heavy emphasis on intention, awareness, and restraint, treating them not as preparatory steps toward ethical action, but as ethically decisive in themselves.

This inward orientation is inseparable from Jain karma theory. Every action, intention, and disposition contributes to the binding of karma, reinforcing cycles of suffering and limitation. Violence is karmically binding not only because of the harm it inflicts upon

others, but because it deepens attachment and ignorance within the agent. Nonviolence, conversely, functions as a liberative discipline precisely because it weakens these binding forces. Ethical conduct, psychological orientation, and spiritual liberation are not separate domains, but mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single process.

As a result, Jain nonviolence is fundamentally **disciplinary rather than expressive**. It is not primarily about signalling moral virtue, securing political legitimacy, or achieving visible outcomes. Instead, it is concerned with regulating how one attends to the world, how one interprets necessity, and how one responds to constraint. Practices such as careful speech, moderated consumption, routine self-examination, and ethical confession function to interrupt patterns of reactivity through which violence is habitually enacted.

This emphasis on ethical self-formation helps explain why Jain texts consistently resist framing nonviolence as a strategy for achieving external ends alone. Peace, social harmony, and political stability may emerge as consequences of nonviolent living, but they are not treated as its primary justification. Nonviolence that bypasses interior discipline risks reproducing the very patterns of domination and resentment it seeks to contest. From a Jain perspective, action undertaken without sustained self-restraint remains ethically fragile, regardless of its stated aims.

It is at this point that modern interpretations of nonviolence, particularly those shaped by political resistance movements, require careful differentiation. Mohandas K. Gandhi, whose engagement with *ahiṃsā* was profoundly influenced by Jain ethical traditions, represents one of the most significant modern appropriations of nonviolence. Yet Gandhi's reconfiguration of *ahiṃsā* as a method of political action already marks an important shift. Where Jain nonviolence is oriented primarily toward ethical self-discipline and the minimisation of karmic entanglement, Gandhian nonviolence is deployed instrumentally toward social and political transformation. This shift helps explain why contemporary understandings of nonviolence often foreground resistance, moral persuasion, and outcome, sometimes at the expense of the interior discipline that Jain ethics treat as foundational.

This is not to diminish Gandhi's moral achievement, but to clarify that Jain nonviolence cannot be collapsed into modern pacifist or political frameworks without significant loss. Jain ethics neither deny the significance of action nor retreat from social responsibility, but they insist that outward action remains ethically secondary to the formation of intention, awareness, and restraint. In this sense, Jain nonviolence critiques not violence alone, but the moral impatience that seeks external change without sustained inward transformation.

At the same time, Jain nonviolence is not socially disengaged or other-worldly. The regulation of consumption, labour, and desire has concrete implications for ecological responsibility, economic justice, and communal coexistence. Practices associated with

nonviolence shape daily life in ways that reduce harm structurally as well as individually. Ethical transformation, while interior in orientation, manifests in patterns of living that affect wider networks of social and environmental relations.

A further distinctive feature of Jain nonviolence is its insistence on **continuous effort** rather than moral finality. Nonviolence is never permanently achieved; it is continually approximated through vigilance and correction. Failure is expected, but it does not excuse complacency. Ethical life is understood as iterative rather than definitive, requiring constant recalibration in response to changing circumstances and renewed insight.

In contexts of war and systemic violence, this perspective reframes ethical inquiry. Rather than asking only whether violence is justified in exceptional circumstances, Jain ethics invite scrutiny of how violence becomes imaginable, legitimate, and normal long before conflict erupts. Fear, identity, and attachment shape moral perception in advance of political decision-making. The task of nonviolence is therefore as much preventative as responsive.

Jain nonviolence thus functions less as a solution to conflict than as a **diagnostic discipline**, exposing the deeper conditions under which harm becomes thinkable and necessary. Its contribution lies not in offering a geopolitical programme for peace, but in resisting the gradual erosion of ethical responsibility that allows violence to appear inevitable.

By insisting that nonviolence begins with the transformation of perception and desire, Jain ethics offer a sustained challenge to approaches that focus exclusively on strategy, legitimacy, or proportionality. Nonviolence, understood in this way, is neither passive nor utopian. It is a demanding practice of ethical self-formation that seeks to interrupt the reproduction of violence at its source.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Jain nonviolence cannot be adequately understood if violence itself is defined narrowly as physical harm alone. By locating violence within states of consciousness shaped by attachment, ignorance, and carelessness, Jain ethics expand the moral field within which harm is recognised and responsibility assigned. Violence, from this perspective, is not an isolated act but a condition that precedes and exceeds action.

The Jain tradition’s differentiation between monastic and lay ethics preserves the integrity of *ahiṃsā* while acknowledging constraint, degrees of responsibility, and lived complexity. Nonviolence is neither absolutised nor diluted; it is retained as a demanding ethical orientation that judges action without denying context. This graduated ethic resists both moral rigidity and pragmatic resignation.

At the centre of Jain nonviolence lies a commitment to lived transformation. *Ahiṃsā* functions not primarily as a political strategy or moral symbol, but as a discipline of awareness aimed at reshaping how the self relates to others within an interdependent world. Grounded in the insight that all living beings exist in relations of mutual dependence, Jain ethics understand violence as both relationally destructive and self-entangling.

In times of war and systemic conflict, the Jain contribution is neither a prescription nor a withdrawal. It offers instead a diagnostic framework that exposes how violence is normalised, justified, and perpetuated at the level of consciousness and culture. By insisting on sustained attention to the inner conditions that generate harm, Jain nonviolence reorients ethical reflection away from reactive justification and toward preventative responsibility.

In doing so, it challenges contemporary discourse to consider whether nonviolence is not first a matter of strategy or policy, but of what kinds of persons and societies we are continuously becoming.

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About the Institute of Jainology

The Institute of Jainology was founded in 1986 to provide an international voice for the Jain faith and Jain communities. Today, under the banner OneJAIN, it represents Jain communities across the UK and Europe, numbering approximately 65,000 people. The Institute works closely with government bodies, universities, museums, faith institutions, and cultural organisations in the UK and internationally, and represents the Jain tradition at major national and global forums.

Recent examples of this work include the restitution of over 2,000 ancient Jain manuscripts held at the Wellcome Collection in London, contributions to the Ancient India exhibition at the British Museum, and the establishment of the Dharmanath Chair in Jain Studies at the University of Birmingham. This sits alongside an ongoing programme of interfaith dialogue, academic collaboration, government engagement, and community development.

The Institute seeks to situate Jain traditions within global intellectual and ethical debates rather than confining them to a narrowly diasporic framework. A distinctive emphasis of this work is on Jainism as a lived ethical tradition, particularly its contributions to discussions on nonviolence (ahiṃsā), tolerance, diversity, and responsible consumerism.