The Institutionalization of the Ethics of “Non-Injury” toward All “Beings” in Ancient India

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The principle of non-injury toward all living beings (ahimsā) in India was originally a rule restraining human interaction with the natural environment. I compare two discourses on the relationship between humans and the natural environment in ancient India: the discourse of the priestly sacrificial cult and the discourse of the renunciants. In the sacrificial cult, all living beings were conceptualized as food. The renunciants opposed this conception and favored the ethics of non-injury toward all beings (plants, animals, etc.), which meant that no living being should be food for another. The first represented an ethics modeled on the power that the eater has over the eaten while the second attempted to overturn this food chain ethics. The ethics of non-injury ascribed ultimate value to every individual living being. As a critique of the individualistic ethics of non-injury, a holistic ethics was developed that prescribed the unselfish performance of one’s duties for the sake of the functioning of the natural system. Vegetarianism became a popular adaptation of the ethics of non-injury. These dramatic changes in ethics in ancient India are suggestive for the possibility of dramatic changes in environmental ethics today.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND THE ETHICS OF NON-INJURY

The tension between killing of animals and plants for food or in sacrifice (himsā) and the principle of non-injury toward all living beings (ahimsā) has been one of the strongest creative forces in South Asia. The tension can be interpreted as a conflict about the proper relationship between the human person and the environment. In this paper, I compare two discourses on human nature interaction in the Hindu religions: the discourse on food (anna) in the religion of the Vedas and the discourse on non-injury toward all living beings (ahimsā) in Sāmkhya and Yoga, two of the schools of classical Hindu systematic religious thought. The first discourse views the world as hierarchical and constituting a food chain: the eater is superior to the eaten. Its ethics is the “law” of the fish. The food chain is extended to include social relationships since the relationship between superior and inferior humans is seen as a relationship between eater and eaten. The second discourse is a rejection of this natural tendency to live on other beings. This discourse ascribes equal ultimate value to all living beings and embraces a transcendent goal beyond the realm

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of change. It is important to note at the outset that in its origin *ahimsā* had nothing to do with vegetarianism, and should not be confused with this custom, since plants generally were included in the category of living beings.\(^1\)

Environmental ethics can be defined as the restraint that human beings put on themselves in their interaction with the rest of nature. *Ahimsā*, while it also includes social activity, must primarily be understood as a regulation of human behavior toward nature and should therefore be viewed as an example of an environmental ethic.\(^2\) The purpose of this ethic was not, of course, to “save the earth” or to “preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community,” for it was developed by religions oriented toward individual salvation, as part of a soteriological perspective on the world. The purpose of *ahimsā* was to save the souls of living beings. This ethical system is strikingly different from any Western system of environmental ethics and is here discussed not as a view for us to adopt, but as a contribution to the cross-cultural understanding of the relationship between a culture’s conceptualization of nature and its ethical regulations.\(^3\)

**TWO PRESUPPOSITIONS**

The doctrine of non-injury presupposes the doctrines of acts (*karman*) and rebirth (*punarbhava*). *Karman* is the belief that living creatures by their activities create dispositions to act in specific ways (habits) and the future experiences (pleasant and unpleasant) they will have. Actions are like the seeds and future experiences the fruits.\(^4\) The idea of rebirth implies that the afterlife is another “here”; the self continues to exist in an endless cycle of continuity (*samōsāra*) in such different life forms as plants, birds, fish, and humans.

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\(^2\) See Unto Tähtinen, *Ahimsā: Non-violence in Indian Tradition* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1976), which is a good discussion of Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu views on non-injury based on textual evidence. Tähtinen admits that non-injury is not “so much a reaction of injury done to men (e.g., in war), rather than as a profound opposition to the institutionalised killing of animals” (p. 38).

\(^3\) Kenneth M. Sayre has argued, in “An Alternative View of Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 13 (1991): 195-213, that an important issue for environmental theorists is how moral norms become instituted in the sense of the social forces by which such norms are set in place (p. 207). The change in environmental ethics in ancient India can explain the dynamics of this kind of change in a way that is valid for India, but also has some wider application.

\(^4\) The central idea of *karman* is well expressed in the following quote from the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad* (Sanskrit text with English translation in S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1953]): “Even as one acts, even as he behaves, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good, the doer of evil becomes evil . . . whatever deed he performs, that he becomes.” It is not necessary for the purpose of this paper to go into a lengthy discussion of this central concept in Indian culture. A good introduction to the discussion on *karma* is found in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
Hinduism believes that the pain a human being causes other living beings to suffer will have to be suffered by that human being later, either in this life or in a later rebirth. Since its earliest occurrence, the doctrine of non-injury was connected with the ideas of karman and rebirth. According to the Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems of religious thought, human, animal, and plant life all have transmigrating vehicles (subtle bodies, lingaśarīra, or mind stuff, citta). Transmigration presupposes ontological equality within a hierarchy of beings. All life forms are interchangeable. Transmigration is another way to conceptualize the circulation of things in the ecosystem. The subtle body is the body that carries the karmic traces (inclinations) of the being as well as its potential capacities for experiencing the world from life in one gross material body to the next. All living beings have such a subtle body and the capacity to be every other life form. It is karman that determines what kind of gross body a subtle body will receive. The idea of karman means that every activity produces effects. Good acts produce good effects and improve the person performing the activity. Evil acts make the person who commits those acts evil. In addition, the evil done will also be suffered by him or her in this or in a future existence. Since there is no hiatus between gods, humans, animals, and plants, acts performed against any of these categories of beings have ethical repercussions.

THE RELIGION OF THE VEDAS (1200-200 B.C.E.)
AND THE DISCOURSE ON FOOD

The religion of the Vedas (1200-800 B.C.E.) is the oldest religion of South Asia known through texts. The Vedas consist of hymns to the gods, many of whom are personifications of the forces and phenomena of nature. Humans, as revealed in these hymns, felt a bond of unity between themselves and the phenomena of nature that they worshiped. The religion centered on performances of sacrifices. The Brāhmaṇa texts (ca. 800 B.C.E.) deal mainly with descriptions of the sacrifices performed by the priests. The last text groups of the Vedic religion, the Āraṇyakas and the Upaniṣads, contain religious

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5 Schmidt, “The Origin of Ahimsā.” Also see G. C. Pande, Śramaṇa Tradition: Its History and Contribution to Indian Culture (Ahmedabad: L. D. Institute of Indology, 1978). Pande writes: “Ahimsā starts from a perception of the sameness of life, the equality of all souls. What made the doctrine of ahimsā imperative was the belief in the transmigration of the soul which linked the lowliest forms of life with the highest in one interacting chain of being” (p. 40).

6 To what degree the gods of the RgVeda represent natural forces and phenomena has been subject to a long discussion. See Braj Bihari Chaubey, Treatment of Nature in the RgVeda (Hoshiapur: Vedic Sahitya Sadan, 1970) for a good overview of discussions of the religious approach to nature in this period. Central in the Vedic religion was the notion of obligation, of giving in response to what one had received from the gods. This sense of obligation linked humans to nature and to the divine beings manifested in it in a mutual bond and in a ritual circle of giving and receiving. Ritual sacrifice of animals and meat eating were common in the ancient Vedic tradition.
speculations of a more systematic nature. Many different religious and philosophical themes are present in these text groups, and among them also is the theme of food. In the *Kauśitaki Upaniṣad* one is asked to say the following in worship:

Thou are the Lord of the universe. A Brahmaṇa [a priest] is one of thy mouths, with that mouth thou eatest the king: make me with that mouth an eater of food. A king is one of thy mouths; with that mouth thou eatest the Vaiśyas [the merchant class]: make me with that mouth an eater of food. A hawk is one of thy mouths; with that mouth thou eatest the birds; make me with that mouth an eater of food. Fire is one of thy mouths; with that mouth thou eatest this world, make me with that mouth an eater of food. In thee, thou hast the fifth mouth; with that thou eatest all created beings: make me with that mouth an eater of food. Do not destroy our life, offering and cattle but destroy the life, offering and cattle of those who hate us and those whom we hate.7

This prayer is for food and dominance. The discourse of food in these texts as well as in medical texts has been well documented.8 This discourse presents one aspect of the understanding of the human nature relationship in the Vedic religion. Smith argues that Vedic religion is nowhere more brutally and materialistically articulated than in the discourse concerning food and eaters of food. In this discourse violence and the power which the eater has over his food are celebrated. Smith writes:

Food . . . was the name for losers in life’s deadly game of “eat or be eaten.” The nutritional chain, comprised of an endless series of food and eaters, exactly describes the order of the species. At the top of the Vedic “natural” world were supernatural (sic) entities who feed on sacrificial oblations that were explicitly represented as substitutes for the human sacrificers who are next in line on the menu. Humans eat animals, the next lowest life-form, and animals eat plants, which in turn, “eat” rain or “the waters” from which all food is ultimately generated.9

What in Europe in the classical period was called “the Great Chain of Being” was presented in India as a sequence of foodstuffs. Zimmermann argues that in India the idea of nature is absorbed by the idea of food:

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The idea of a “science” of Nature is altogether alien to India or, to be more precise, in India it is formulated in a radically different fashion. . . . The idea of nature is absorbed by the idea of Food. . . . The chain of being is presented in a form of a sequence of foodstuffs . . . food is the root of living beings . . . man is first, the rest are at his service.  

Eating was the definitional activity. The discourse on food categorized nature into eaters and food and saw consumption as the ultimate victory of the consumer over the consumed. The groups lower in the hierarchy of species were food for the groups on top. The human species was situated lower than the gods, to whom they provided food through the sacrifice, but they were above all other species, since these were food for humans. This view of the natural order as a food chain categorized into dominating feeders and dominated food was consequently used as the paradigm for the naturalness of the hierarchical social order. The killing of animals was a sacred act. The sacrifice fulfilled the wishes of the performer of the sacrifice for long life, riches, children, cows, etc. The sacrifice was thought to ensure the food supply since it empowered the invisible divine powers which, in the final analysis, controlled the sources of food supply. The ethics of the food discourse was “the law of the fishes.” The big fish eats the little fish. The chain of being is presented as a sequence of food, the food chain. “Nature in the Veda was regarded as a hierarchically ordered set of Chinese boxes, or better, Indian stomachs.” A verse from Taittirīya Upaniṣad (2.2) further illustrates the discourse:

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From food, verily, creatures are produced
Whatsoever [creatures] dwell on the earth
Moreover by food in truth they live
Moreover into that they also pass
For truly, food is the chief of beings
From food created things are born
By food, when born, do they grow up
It both is eaten and eat things
Because of that it is all called food.
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This description has many similarities with the modern understanding of the food chain. Energy, chemical elements, and some compounds are transferred from creature to creature along food chains, and that which you eat defines your position in the hierarchy. One way individuals interact in the ecosystem is by feeding on one another.

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10 Zimmermann, The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats, pp. 198-203.
11 Smith, “Eaters, Food and Social Hierarchy in Ancient India,” p. 177.
WHO INSTITUTED THE ETHICS OF NON-INJURY?

The renunciatory way of life was the decisive point in the development of the doctrine of non-injury (ahimsā). Recent writers have emphasized that renunciation erupted into the religio-cultural tradition of India as a totally new and unique phenomenon. But renunciants, of course, existed earlier. Mahāvīra, the historical founder of Jainism, is by the tradition itself known as the twenty-fourth tīrthamkāra (fordmaker). The historicity of his predecessor Pārśva, who flourished in Banaras in 850 B.C.E., seems definite since the Buddhist texts mention the existence of large numbers of followers of a doctrine attributed to him. It is a fact that the popularity of the renunciatory way of life and the ahimsā ethics increased dramatically from around 500 B.C.E. The newness, it seems, is in their popularity rather than in the ideas themselves. Around 500 B.C.E. many religious individuals and groups (the most well known being Buddha and the Buddhists, Mahāvīra and the Jains, Proto Śāṃkhyas, Yogins, and other renunciant thinkers of the Upaniṣads) propagated a renunciatory way of life. Jainism or Buddhism were not the only sources of the doctrine of non-injury, as is sometimes believed, but they took part in an all-India religious development of that time that favored non-injury.

Within a few hundred years the commandment of non-injury toward all beings had been entered as a universal ethical command in the Brahmanical orthodox lawbooks. The ethics of non-injury toward all living beings had been, to some degree, assimilated and integrated by the priestly class as well as the other powerful groups in the society, even if “orthodox thinkers were always ill at ease in dealing with renunciation so foreign not only to their way

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12 See J. C. Heesterman, “Review of Ludwig Alsdorf, Beitrage zur Geschichte von Vegetarismus und Rinderverehrung in Indien,” Indo-Iranian Journal 9 (1966): 147-49. See also Smith, “Eaters, Food and Social Hierarchy in Ancient India,” p. 198. The emphasis on non-injury toward all living beings distinguished the renunciatory way of life from the old Vedic tradition in which animal sacrifice and enjoyment of meat was common.

13 See Patrick Olivelle, “A Definition of World Renunciation,” Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens 19 (1975): 75-83. Smith has suggested that this shift in values is comparable to what Nietzsche claimed the early Christians did by systematically turning inside out the “pagan” values of the Romans (“Eaters, Food and Social Hierarchy in Ancient India,” p. 197).


15 Schmidt, in “The Origin of Ahiṃsā,” argues that the original motive for the doctrine of non-injury was fear resulting from the breakdown of the magico-ritualistic world conception. Schmidt shows that the vows of the Buddhist and Jain monks, among whom the vow of ahiṃsā stands first, closely agree with the Brahmanical renouncers. Others have tried to show that the origin was in the non-Vedic culture. The great Indian historian of philosophy, S. N. Dasgupta, writes that the renunciant movements arose “out of a reaction against the sacrificial disciplines of the Brāhmaṇas (the performers of the rituals)” and “were marked by a strong aversion against the taking of animal life, and against the doctrine of offering animals at the sacrifices” (A History of Indian Philosophy [1922; reprint ed., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975], vol. 1, p. 208).

16 Manusmṛti 10.63.
of life but also to their framework of thought.” One social consequence of this change from sanctification of the food chain to the ethical command of non-injury toward all living beings (ahimsā) for society at large was the reorganizing of the rules for social ranking. Instead of the previous distinction between eater and eaten (powerful and powerless), individuals and groups were ranked on a pure-impure scale. This change involved an inversion of values. The most pure were those who renounced power over other beings, and those whose occupations caused little violence. When the Hindu orthodox renunciant took the vow of renunciation, he gave “the gift of safety to all creatures.” He says, “From me no danger (or fear) will come to any creature.” Since his place in the hierarchy, from the point of view of the food discourse, came from his power to eat others, by giving up the others as food he renounced both his place in the hierarchy and the food chain altogether. In the verses the renunciants chant at the moments of renunciation two important themes appear: (1) the proclamation of the renunciation of social life and (2) the proclamation of non-injury toward all living beings. Having given the gift of safety to all living beings (may living beings “go to sleep and wake therefrom at ease without fear of me”) and vowed never to injure any living being, he abjured his own self-protection against wild animals, and he turned to God for protection against animals and men: “I have given safety to all beings, O Lord Supreme, and have come to thee for refuge; protect me O Puruṣottama!”

NON-INJURY IN SĀMKHYA AND YOGA

Sāmkhya and Yoga, two of the six classical orthodox Hindu systems of religious thought (darśana), have been called the very embodiment of the Hindu renunciant point of view. Sāmkhya and Yoga stand out among the

17  Olivelle, “A Definition of World Renunciation,” p. 83.
classical *darśana-s* as those most concerned with nature and the transformation of matter. Sāṃkhya and Yoga were paths toward transcendence through investigation of nature, not texts or doctrinal sayings. It aimed at liberation of the self (*puruṣa*) by leading it to the experience of the subjectivity of nature. Because Sāṃkhya and Yoga were orthodox schools, their influence on Hinduism cannot be doubted (the influence of proto-Sāṃkhya and Yoga ideas on the Bhagavadgītā and Mokṣadharma of the Mahābhārata, the Purāṇas, etc. is undisputed), and it is probably to some degree through them that the doctrine of non-injury became influential in the Hindu religion. The philosophical material and the analysis of nature that was incorporated into the lawbooks and the mythological texts of the classical period were to a large degree Sāṃkhya and Yoga material. Among the groups that challenged the ethics of the Brahmanical society, Sāṃkhya and Yoga groups certainly played an important role. I therefore investigate here the views of Sāṃkhya and Yoga that can throw light on the change in values.

The path leading to liberation in the classical Yoga of Patañjali (400-500 c.E.) consists of eight disciplined practices. The eight steps are restraint, observances, postures, regulation of breath, withholding of the senses, fixity, meditation, and perfect concentration. The first discipline, restraint, consists of the following five ethical rules: non-injury toward all living beings (*ahimsā*), truthfulness, non-stealing, continence, and non-appropriation of objects. All other virtues are subordinate to non-injury, and non-injury includes the other ethical rules. Non-injury toward all living beings was the first step toward salvation. It signified a break with the place of the individual in the food chain, and the first step toward permanent transcendence of nature. Non-injury sums up the five restraints and is the goal of all of them. Non-injury toward all living beings is therefore the supreme ethical principle without which there can be no renunciation and therefore no transcending of the cycle of life and death.

In the discussion of the five ethical rules, the *Vyāsabhāṣya* on *Yogasūtra* defines non-injury as abstaining from injuring any being at any time and in any manner. The other four forms of restraint are based on the commandment of non-injury. Truthfulness is qualified with the following: words should be uttered not for inflicting harm on creatures but for their benefit, because if they hurt others, they do not produce piety as truth would, but only sin. Truthful words beneficial to all creatures should be uttered after careful consideration.

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21 *Yogasūtra* 2.29.
22 Ibid., 2.30.
23 Ibid.
Vyāsa on Yogasūtra 2.34 discusses eighty-one forms of injury toward living beings. First, he divides injury into three kinds: that which the person does himself, that which he causes another to do, and that of which he approves. Each of these are threefold since they can be ruled by greed, anger, or infatuation. Greed, anger, and infatuation are each threefold. They can be mild, moderate, and vehement. They again are gently mild, moderate mild, and keenly mild. The Bhāṣya states that injuries are of endless varieties since the variety of beings are endless. Next comes a criticism of the sacrifice:

He who commits an injury first of all reduces the strength of the victim, then causes him pain by falling upon him with a knife or something of that kind and afterwards even deprives him of life. When once he has taken away (the victim’s) strength, the strength of his own animate or inanimate aids begins to dwindle away. As a result of causing pain, he himself experiences pain in hells and in (the bodies of) animals and of departed spirits and in other (forms). 24

Sūtra 2.31 discusses non-injury as a universal rule versus a rule limited by restriction of caste, place, and time, and of concepts of duty. The strict rule of non-injury conflicted with practical life and the rules had to be modified. The commentaries to Yogasūtra 2.30 and 2.35 show awareness about the need to adapt the rule to practical life. Very few beings have the capacity to attempt to renounce the food chain. The strict rule is only for yogins. Examples of restricted non-injury is the fisherman who practices non-injury toward all except fish, one who practices non-injury only in sacred places or on sacred days, or a man who sacrifices an animal to feed a priest (Brahmin). Non-injury, says the Vyāsabhāṣya, should be practiced universally by a yogin. The medieval commentator, Viṣṇuṇabhikṣu, comments that giving up ritual action (which involves injury to grass and trees) is not a sin unless you are a true yogin.25 He distinguishes between external and internalized deeds and recommends internal deeds. All attempts to limit injury, however, are considered valuable. There are two traditions of non-injury in India, one which holds non-violence as a universal norm, while the other distinguishes between morally approved and disapproved injury. The Hindu custom of vegetarianism is an attempt to limit injury, by disapproving of some forms of injury, and might be a popularization of the original doctrine of non-injury. Participation in meat eating in the rituals was considered obligatory by those who considered it a morally approved form of injury. The Vasiṣṭha Dhamasūtra xi. 34 says that if an ascetic does not partake of the flesh when requested to do so in the ritual for the gods, he falls into hell for numberless years. Similarly, the Kūrma Purāṇa 2.17.41 (a medieval text), states: “One who upon being invited to a funeral ceremony or to a sacrificial rite, avoids the eating of meat, goes to hell so

24 Vyāsabhāṣya on the Yogasūtra 2.34.
numberless (in different rebirths), as the hairs belonging to an animal.” These statements show that even if non-injury became accepted as a purer way of life, the conflict between non-injury as a universal norm and the norm of restricted non-injury continued. The ritual texts define killing of animals in sacrifice as non-injury.

The consequences of opposing all inclinations to injury is discussed next in the *Yogasūtra*. The attitude of non-injury of the yogin changes the attitude of nature around him. Because of his peacefulness, nature becomes peaceful. *Yogasūtra* 2.35 states: “As soon as he is grounded in abstinence from injury, his presence begets a suspension of enmity.” The commentator Vācaspati Miśra (1000 C.E.) says:

> Even enemies whose hostility is everlasting like horse and buffalos, mouse and cat, snake and mongoose, in the presence of the exalted yogin who is grounded in abstinence from injury, conform themselves to his mind stuff and renounce altogether their hostility.\(^{26}\)

Here the food chain is totally transcended. Even the cat and the mouse conform to the influence of the renunciant and themselves abandon their role as eater and food.

A yogin acquires power by fasting. This activity, thus, represents an inversion of the Vedic values of the power of the eater over what he eats.\(^{27}\)

But how is it possible not to injure other beings? Humans are part of the food chain. We cannot exist separated from nature. Whatever other identities human beings have, we are beings belonging to nature. Sāmkhya and Yoga postulate two forms of knowledge and goals of life: enjoyment (*bhoga*) and liberation (*apavarga*). Enjoyment has to do with *karman*. It is the experiences of pleasure and pain that the individual enjoys and suffers according to his previous acts. With respect to enjoyment (*bhoga*) the *Vyāsabhaṣya* on *Yogasūtra* comments, “No enjoyment is possible without injury to another.”\(^{28}\) This remark means that it is not possible to act in this world without hurting other living beings (stepping on them, killing them within the body, etc.). It implies a keen awareness of the causing of pain as the nature of existence: only liberation (*apavarga*) puts an end to injury toward others. A modern Sāmkhya commentator on the *Yogasūtra* says:

> Since killing of living beings is unavoidable in the course of one’s life, some people wonder how it can be possible to practice non-injury. This doubt arises out

\(^{26}\) *Tattvaśāra*, p. 186.

\(^{27}\) “Drinking water mixed with milk, for a fortnight, month, season or year, or observing complete fast for a month, the Yogin acquires power.” *Āraṇya*, *Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali*, p. 242.

\(^{28}\) *Vyāsabhāṣya* on *Yogasūtra* 2.15.
of ignorance of the principle of the practice of non-injury. The commentator has said that enjoyment of material objects is not possible without hurting others. Therefore in order to live, hurting living beings is inevitable. Knowing that, the Yogins practice Yoga to avoid being born again. This is the highest form of practice of non-injury (2.30). 29

This wish of ending rebirth seems to be the logical conclusion of the ethics of non-injury. All of nature (prakṛti) is one substance of a tripartite nature according to the Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems of religious thought: there is a degree of pleasure, pain, and confusion in everything. Thus, however much pleasure is produced by an act, some pain will also be produced. This view is illustrated in Vācaspati Miśra’s Tattvākaumudī in an argument about the sacrifice. 30 Even if it will give the sacrificer thousands of years in Heaven, the pain he causes the victims sacrificed (in this case the killing of animals and the destruction of grains and seeds) will finally put an end to his pleasures and bring him suffering. The Sāmkhyakārikā (350-450 C.E.) begins with the statement that the quest to end pain is undertaken because no other means to eliminate pain totally and finally has been found.

It is clear from this statement that consciousness of the impossibility of being alive and at the same time not hurting other living beings, and thereby not causing future pain to one’s self, was one important element that urged the practitioners of Sāṃkhya and Yoga to strive toward liberation (mokṣa). Sāṃkhya and Yoga are dualist philosophies. Liberation consists of the experience of the absolute difference between the human self or soul (puruṣa) and nature (prakṛti). The goal of Sāṃkhya and Yoga is to have this experience. Human beings by identifying themselves with the food chain misunderstand therefore their true identities. There is a transcendent aspect of human beings, as with all other beings, since all beings are a mixture of puruṣa and prakṛti, spirituality and materiality. To experience truly that our mental faculties as well as our bodies are part of the natural environment, and therefore different from the spiritual self, is the liberating experience. The ethics of non-injury toward all beings is therefore a result both of the belief in the ontological equality of all beings (karman and transmigration) and the idea that the true identity of all beings totally transcends nature.

Sāṃkhya and Yoga do not believe that it is possible to change the natural world so as to make it compatible with human happiness. Rather it is the human beings themselves who have to change their perception of reality. The Hindu attitude to nature has been characterized as non-attachment, according to which nature is to be left alone. 31 This characteristic is, perhaps, an over-

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29 Āraṇya, Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali, p. 209.
30 Tattvākaumudī, pp. 6-7.
31 Ravi Ravindra, Science and Spirit (New York: Paragon House, 1991) distinguishes, in an interesting generalization, between three views of nature: the Western, the East-Asian, and the
generalization, but it does to some extent represent the view of the Sāmkhya and Yoga systems of religious thought.

**COMPARISON AND CONCLUSION**

The ethical doctrine of non-injury toward all living beings (ahimsā) can be understood as an attempt to transcend the ecological processes of nature, that is, to get out of the food chain. The discourse of non-injury is a complete reversal of the food discourse. The discourse of renunciation reverses the discourse of domination. Instead of the law of the fish of the food discourse, in which the big fish eats the small fish, in the vicinity of the yogin, the food chain is transcended: the cat abandons the mouse as food. In the food chain ethics, all beings are considered food, while in the discourse of renunciation, no living beings are food. According to the food discourse, one acquires power by eating others, while according to the discourse of non-injury, one attains power by fasting, i.e., non-eating. The hierarchy of the food chain is based on domination, while, according to the discourse of non-injury, the hierarchy is based on purity, which is partly attained by non-eating. According to the food chain discourse, humans should feed the gods, whereas the renunciants renounce the sacrifice.

The food chain is a continuous transformation of life into nutrition and is characterized, like everything else, by pain (duḥkha). Pain and violence (himsā) are necessary consequences of biological existence. The principle of renunciation of injury toward others revolves around the religious opposition between life in the world and its renunciation. Renouncing the repeated biological death of oneself, one renounces also the death of others. The attempt to liberate oneself absolutely and finally from pain and violence begins with the practice of non-injury toward all life forms. Liberation (mokṣa) meant, from this point of view, the transcending of the food-chain. That the concept ahimsā is formulated in the negative indicates that it negates something: it renounces in a fundamental way the participation in biological and physical life (prakṛti).

The ethics of non-injury redefined the relationship between humans as well as the relationship between humans and nature. While the previous system ranked the dominators of nature highest, and in some sense mirrored the hierarchy of the food chain, the renunciant system ranked highest those with the least impact on nature. The ideal had changed from one of dominating nature to one of restraint and withdrawal from nature. In other words, we have

South-Asian. In the Western view, nature is alien, an “it” to be conquered, and there is a competition of man versus nature. In the East-Asian view, nature must be transformed, improved on to be aesthetically perfect. The South-Asian view, however, according to Ravindra, accepts nature as it is. Nature does not need to be controlled or changed; rather, it is the vision of the individual that must be changed.
here a documented ethical revolution from a religion that recommended animal sacrifice and ranked the killer above the victim (sanctification of the food chain) to a prohibition of animal and plant killings (the attempt to transcend the food chain). Many groups who restrained their behavior toward nature were ranked above groups whose inclinations or occupations involved violence toward living beings.

Roderick Nash in his most recent book, The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics, has characterized the emergence of the idea that the human-nature relationship should be treated as a moral issue as the most extraordinary development in recent Western intellectual history. Similarly, we have in the case of ancient India an example of the successful expansion of ethics to include all living beings. The goal of human life and also of nature was, however, defined as a spiritual rather than a moral issue. Although one purpose of nature was the provision of pleasure to all beings, always mixed with pain, another was the liberation of spiritual selves from nature. Nature (prakṛti), the Sāṃkhya and Yoga thinkers discovered, could be used for the purpose of liberation of the soul (puruṣa), and this process had to start with non-injury toward all living beings. With this view of life and nature, an ethics was developed that condemned injury toward all beings.

The new ethic was individualistic and recommended the renunciation of the world and was therefore by many viewed as defective. Attempts were consequently made to formulate an ethical teaching based on duties toward the whole. A famous text, the Bhagavadgītā (200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.), was an attempt to criticize the individualistic ethic of the renunciants in favor of a more holistic ethics. No one, the Gītā says, is able for a moment not to act—even the maintenance of the body cannot be accomplished without action. Action should, however, be performed without egoism and for the sake of the whole. In chapter 3, verses 13-16, the so-called pravartitam cakram, a wheel of interdependencies of beings, food, rain, and religious rituals and ritual power is described:

Beings exist from food, food has its origin from the rain god.
The rain god exists from the sacrifice, the sacrifice has its origin in ritual action (3.14).

He who does not turn the wheel thus set in motion here on earth, lives, Oh Pārtha, malicious, sense-delighted and in vain. (3.16)

Humans have the duty to participate in this activity for the sake literally of holding the world together (lokasamgraha). He who does not keep the wheel

33 Bhagavadgītā 3.8.
moving, the text says, lives in vain. Participation in the functioning of the ecosystem is here presented as the highest value. The hierarchy of beings has been replaced by a circle of interdependencies, each part is necessary for the functioning of the whole, and the attempt of transcending the food chain has been condemned as irresponsible and egoistic.

The ethics of non-injury toward all living beings is founded on the desire for freedom from the interdependencies of nature. This foundation is very different from the contemporary environmental concern of developing an environmental ethics. The contemporary concern is based on an understanding of the interdependency of humans with the community of all living beings and a wish for an integration of humans with nature. This point is paradigmatically expressed by Aldo Leopold, who has suggested that ethics is the attempt “to integrate the individual to society,” and therefore that environmental ethics is the attempt to integrate humans into the land community by making each human a “plain member and citizen” of the biotic community. Accordingly, Leopold, the “individual is a plain member of the community of interdependent parts.” Unlike the land ethic, which sought to integrate humans into the community of living beings, the ideology of non-injury of all living beings of the Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems was intended as an escape from interdependency. These systems do not deny the facts of interdependency, but this interdependency is perceived as fundamentally painful. The idea of mutual aid and ecological interdependency, however, was accepted and is referred to in Sāṃkhya and Yoga texts. The Vyāsabhāṣya (600 C.E.) on the Yogasūtra says:

The gross elements sustain the body and also sustain themselves. Each of the species, animals, men and gods, being interrelated is the cause of each other’s support.

Vācaspati in his commentary the Tattvavaiśāraṇī (900 C.E.) explains:

For the human body is sustained by the use of bodies of tame animals, of birds, of wild animals and of plants. Similarly bodies like the tiger (are sustained) by the use of the human bodies and those of tame and wild animals and of others. And again in the same way the bodies of tame animals, the birds, and wild animals (are sustained) by the use of plants and similar things. Likewise the divine body (is sustained) by the use of sacrifices, of goats and deer and the flesh of other animals, of ghee, and baked rice cakes and of branches of mango and handfuls of darbha grass offered by human beings. In the same way the deity also sustains human and other beings by granting boons and showers. Thus dependence is reciprocal.

35 Vyāsabhāṣya on the Yogasūtra 2.28.
36 Tattvavaiśāraṇī, p. 177.
Interdependency is a cause of suffering since staying alive implies violence toward other living beings. The ritualistic acts of the Veda-s should be neglected, says the commentary *Yuktidipikā* (600-700 C.E.), even if they are instrumental in attaining heaven, since these acts cannot be performed without killing such living beings as animals and plants. The text continues:

Hence they (these acts) should be neglected by those who wish well for themselves because it is not stated that one should act for one’s own benefit by killing others. It is stated, “One should not do to others which is disagreeable to one’s own self.”

Although a thing is right if it does not cause pain to other living beings, the ethics of non-injury is also founded on the knowledge that interdependency with nature implies that whatever one wants to attain, such as food or even heaven, will cause pain to others (and eventually to one’s self). Only liberation from material existence can free the individual from causing pain to others and, by implication, to one’s self. The development of the ethics of non-injury toward all living beings, thus, started with the empirical facts of interdependency. However, having accepted humans as an integrated part of the food chain, liberation from that food chain was then desired.

It has not been my intention to present any of these positions from the Hindu religions as ideals that we should uncritically adopt. The ethics of non-injury was, of course, not intended as an ecological practice, since the object was to escape interdependency. The rule that one should act for the sake of the welfare of the whole (*lokasamgraha*) seems to have the greatest appeal for contemporary environmental concern. The attempt to have wilderness areas set aside that are off limits even for human enjoyment calls, however, for an act of supreme renunciation and a willingness to give independence to the natural world. Such an act of withdrawal has to be based on a decision of non-injury toward whole ecological systems, not just toward individual living beings, suggesting a comparative link with the ethics of non-injury.

The Hindu systems of ethics discussed in this paper should not be judged by the contemporary environmental problems of India, which are caused by a new set of circumstances (overpopulation, urbanization, industrialism, poverty, pollution, exhaustion of soil fertility, etc.), in regards to which these systems of ethics are, in their classical formulations, to some degree irrelevant. These traditions do, however, provide material for the reworking of an ethical response to the new circumstances, which is a necessity for all the cultures of the world. In addition, they provide examples for the cross-cultural comparison of environmental ethics, and, in this way, may perhaps suggest changes in contemporary theory.

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37 *Yuktidipikā*, vol. 1, p. 66.