

Intellectual *Ahimsā* and Epistemic Friction in Jain Philosophy

The concepts of intellectual *ahimsā* (intellectual non-harming) and epistemic friction¹ can be derived from Jain philosophy. Jainism is one of the heterodox religions of classical India. Like Buddhism, and unlike Hinduism, it does not accept the authority of the Vedas (sacred texts) in developing its worldview. Jain epistemology embraces *nayavāda*² –a theory of perspectives or epistemic standpoints that humans adopt in inquiry. In general, humans are able to realize that their knowledge is always from a perspective because (i) they are not omniscient, and (ii) human sense organs, such as vision, are always perspectival –from a vantage point.

For example, when you look at a the facing side of a sphere from one side, you might assume that the other side of the sphere is there because you judge that what is in front of you is a ball based on how the facing side looks. However, it is possible that when you talk to someone who is looking at the same object from the other side, they say, “there is a concave side over here, I don’t think it is a ball. What do you see?” While you expect the ball to be complete given what you see, your evidence is from a perspective. From another perspective, you discover that your expectation is not fulfilled.³

In general, when one is aware of their own epistemic limitations with respect to answering a question, yet has a desire to answer the question as best as they can, and they adopt the attitude of intellectual *ahimsā* (intellectual non-harming), they will seek *epistemic friction* for the purposes of correction or completion. Epistemic friction occurs when inquirers get together to share claims in order to improve their epistemic position. In the example of the ball, you gained epistemic friction about whether there is a ball before you by talking to the person whose perspective on the ball is different than your own. Intellectual *ahimsā* requires that when one is aware of their epistemic limitations they adopt an attitude of openness and care towards others in their inquiry. If you dogmatically defended your position that there is a ball before you without being open to what the other person was saying as additional evidence you ought to consider, you would have failed to exercise intellectual *ahimsā*.

Why is intellectual *ahimsā* important? Because were one to recognize their epistemic limitations and not be benevolent and caring towards others who could improve their epistemic situation, they would be behaving in a way that would likely not produce knowledge. So, if knowledge is valuable, then the proper means to acquiring it, among which intellectual *ahimsā*, are valuable. Openness is necessary because new evidence or points of view could help one come to a better judgment. Care is necessary because not all agents stand on equal footing with respect either to their social status in communicating knowledge or in their ability to do so. Caring about a co-inquirer involves adopting a stance of caring to understand what the other is saying and contributing to the inquiry.

It is important to explore intellectual *ahimsā* and epistemic friction through the ancient Indian parable of *the Elephant and the Blind men*. This context provides for a way to see how the concepts arrive out of Jain epistemology. Although the parable is from around the 1st century B.C., and can be found in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist contexts, because intellectual *ahimsā* is arguably

¹ Although I am aware of Gila Sher’s (2016) *Epistemic Friction* (OUP), I have intentionally not read that book so as to allow for the development of my own view of the phrase based on an engagement with Jain epistemology.

² For this basic account see Koller, J. 2000. *Syādvāda* as the epistemological key to the Jaina middle way metaphysics of *Anekāntavāda*. *Philosophy East and West* 50.3: 400-407; and Soni, J. 2000. Basic Jaina Epistemology. *Philosophy East and West* 50.3: 367-377

³ I am taking this example from Husserl’s discussion of perceptual anticipations.

one of the main contributions of the Jain tradition, I will be developing it relative to the Jain presentation of the parable.

Several blind men are brought before a king and asked to describe an elephant. An elephant is brought to them and they proceed to feel it with their hands. One, who grasps the elephant's trunk, claims that an elephant is like a snake. Another, grasping a leg, claims it is like a tree. Yet another grasps the tail and says it is like a rope; and another, feeling the elephant's side, claims it is like a wall. The blind men then argue amongst themselves about the true nature of the elephant. Who is correct? Only one that can see the whole elephant can say who is correct?

While the parable does talk of blind men, no important epistemological point flows from that component. The story could be told with sighted women looking at any object that is so big that they can only take in a limited portion of it from a given standpoint or because they are in a dark room. The main point behind the blindness is that each person has a limited point of view caused by their blindness and the vantage point from which they have access to the elephant. Because the parable is sometimes taken to suggest that certain theses about knowledge and realism are true, it is important to point out how it is *not* a defense of any of those theses.⁴

- (a) Anti-Realism: the doctrine that there is no truth, or that truth is not ultimately real. *Notice* there is an elephant before them, so there is some truth about what is actually before the blind men.
- (b) Anti-Absolutism: the doctrine that there is no absolute truth, or that truth is relative and conventional. *Notice* there really is an elephant. It is just that from any standpoint one can only grasp so much, and thus everyone's conclusion is from a limited standpoint.
- (c) Anti-Knowledge: the doctrine that there is no knowledge, or that truth cannot be known. *Notice* that a sighted person can know the truth about what is before the blind men. It is just that the blind cannot know it because their perspectives are limited.

From this conception of the parable, especially (c), we can derive / arrive at the concept of *epistemic friction* by looking at what happens when the blind men are asked to debate what is before them without having the opportunity to share evidence first.

The blind man who feels *the tail of the elephant as a snake*, and judges that what is before him is a snake, consequently *expects* that as he moves his hand down the tail he will continue to feel those things which one expects to feel when one touches a snake. The tail, being sufficiently similar to the snake in many respects, will continue to confirm his belief that he is holding a snake, even though he is not.

The blind man who feels *the stomach of the elephant as a wall*, and judges that what is before him is a wall, consequently *expects* that as he moves his hand across the stomach he will continue to feel those things which one expects to feel when they touch a wall. The large flat expanse of the elephant's stomach being sufficiently similar to a wall in many respects will continue to confirm his belief that he is touching a wall, even though he is not.

⁴ For this articulation of how the parable of the elephant is *not* supposed to be understood, as well as for the initial parable itself, see: Long, J. 2009. *Jainism: An Introduction* (Introductions to Religion). London: I. B. Tauris Publishing.

Against this backdrop the two blind men might dialogue as follows over the question: what is before us?

Snake: There is a snake before us, because the shape of the thing before us is long and tubular.

Wall: There is a wall before us, because the shape of the thing before us is flat, wide, and long.

Now although each is wrong about what is before them, each person is making a reasonable judgment based on their evidence and the similarity between the part of the elephant they have access to and what they judge. It is not unreasonable for them to judge that what is before them is a snake and a wall respectively. Furthermore, we should note that (i) *an error* once made can persist in light of expectation and confirmation bias (interpreting evidence as always confirming one's hypothesis); and (ii) *the error* once made can be corrected either by having experience of the elephant from a distinct vantage point, such as if the two people switched places, or by coming into discussion with someone from the distinct vantage point, such as if the two were to talk to each other. Let's take the second option. Were the blind men to engage with one another and debate there are two stances they can take.

On the one hand, they can adopt the stance of *positioned inquiry* where each holds fixed their position, and seeks to refute the other, rather than consider that they might not have all the evidence and could be reasoning incorrectly. The parable as told ends in mass disagreement because each person has come to the conversation already holding firm to the limited point of view from which their evidence was derived. As long as they continue to hold strong to their conviction that they have a sufficient amount of evidence, there will be no reason for them to back down in the face of disagreement.

On the other hand, they could adopt the stance of *intellectual ahimsā*. To understand this concept further, we need to understand the concept of *ahimsā*,⁵ and what it means to apply it to the realm of inquiry.

Ahimsā is most often translated as non-harmfulness, non-violence, or absence of a desire to harm any creature. The doctrine is *not unique* to Jainism, it can be found in the distinct Eightfold Paths of Buddhism and Yoga. There are two important components of it.

First, the doctrine, though stated in negative terms, has a positive component as well. When one lives a life in accordance with *ahimsā* one cultivates a general attitude of *benevolence* towards all creatures. Benevolence is the positive attitude / disposition that one operates from.

Second, the doctrine should not be understood on consequentialist grounds. For example, *ahimsā* does not allow it to be the case that an individual who intends to harm, but fails to cause harm has thereby acted in accord with non-harmfulness. Rather, *ahimsā* is about intent. One must lack the desire or intent to harm any creature.

With these clarifications in place we can now ask: what does it mean to apply *ahimsā* to the realm of inquiry? Taking *ahimsā* as an attitude I offer the following account.

⁵ For an engaging discussion on *ahimsā* see: Bothara, S. 2004. *Ahimsā: The Science of Peace*. Jaipur: Prakrit Bharati Academy.

Intellectual *Ahimsā* is a dispositional attitude of open inclusiveness⁶ to distinct points of view, which is grounded in (i) an acknowledgement of one's own epistemic limitations coupled with (ii) a desire for epistemic friction for the purposes of understanding and knowledge production via correction or completion.

In the parable each blind man only has partial grasp of the total set of evidence. As a consequence, none of them can make an accurate judgment about what is before them, yet all can conclude that their evidence could be improved upon (for example by sight, or by having access to other parts of the elephant). In fact, their own judgments, based on the parts they grasp, would continue to be confirmed by their expectations of what is to come. The man who judges early, upon grabbing the tail, that a rope is before him, will only continue to believe that there is a rope, as opposed to a tail, as long as the experience aligns with his expectations based on his judgment.

By adopting the attitude of intellectual *ahimsā* each person would be in a position to engage in the following line of reasoning. From my limited grasp of the situation I am only able to judge based on what is before me. However, given that there is more evidence than what I can collect, I should be asking: what best accounts for all of our disparate judgments? In collectively reasoning together we should look for what has features like a flat surface, a sturdy tree trunk, a snake, and a rope at different locations. Perhaps, *it is an elephant whose stomach is like a wall, whose trunk is like a snake, whose feet are like tree trunks, and whose tail is like a rope*. What each individual ultimately sees is that they can seek to advance a view of what is before them based on their own evidence alone, or systematize the evidence coming from everyone by assuming that the evidence before them is simply part of the total set of evidence. This in turn requires that they seek epistemic friction for the purposes of either correction or completion.

Epistemic correction refers to the fact that a particular point of view may have been incorrectly produced independently of any facts about another point of view. For example, epistemic correction is required when one miscalculates in doing sums because one has been inattentive to the numbers involved. Epistemic correction is available to each of the blind men, since what they judge they are touching is false: it is tail not a rope! Were each to regain their sight, yet still be occluded from seeing the whole elephant, they would be able to correct their error. It is a tail, not a rope. But a tail of what, he would know not. *Epistemic completion* has to do with the need for a point of view to be completed by another point of view in order for a better judgment to be made. All of the men can benefit from completion. Were the one that now judges it to be a tail and not a rope to have more evidence from the others as to what they see, she would be in a position to say: the best explanation for all of these different observations, it is a tail, a stomach, a trunk, a snake, is that it is an elephant with parts that feel like these other things.

Moreover, when one is aware of the need for *epistemic correction* or *completeness*, and has adopted the dispositional attitude of *intellectual ahimsā*, one should be led to have the appropriately coupled desire to seek *epistemic friction*—engagement with other points of view for the purposes of discovering whether *epistemic correction* or *completion* is required for revising one's judgment.

Intellectual *ahimsā*, and the seeking of epistemic friction it engenders, are good for almost any kind of inquiry. However, in philosophy, where one might be seeking a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon in the human condition, such as the nature of the good life, these

⁶ The term 'open inclusiveness' that I am using is derived from consideration of the work of Jeffery Long's "Anekānta and Ahimsā: A Jain Philosophy of Universal Acceptance" The Virchand Gandhi Lecture, April 18, 2013, Claremont School of Theology.

concepts are especially important. They are so because they help philosophers to exit their normal echo chambers (communities of co-inquirers) in an epistemically responsible way. One important way in which this materializes is with respect to cross-traditional or cross-cultural philosophy.

There is simply too much philosophy to study. As a consequence, one might retreat to their community of co-inquirers who all work in the same tradition of philosophy. While there are benefits to this, such as having a common method and set of assumptions, it is not helpful for philosophy when one seeks a comprehensive understanding. When seeking such an understanding one must examine and engage positions from different traditions so that one has a truly *comprehensive* understanding. Furthermore, if a philosopher is searching for wisdom or truths about reality, they ought to survey all the reasonable positions on a subject matter, such as the nature of morality, rather than isolating themselves to what is familiar to them from within their own tradition.

Intellectual *ahimsā*, and the seeking of epistemic friction that it engenders, make it an important attitude for doing philosophy. Friction isn't always bad. Movement is possible because of it. Epistemic friction is the kind of friction that makes inquiry move. Intellectual *ahimsā* is an attitude of non-harming care towards other inquirers. It facilitates epistemic friction in an epistemically responsible way, which in turn makes inquiry move in an epistemically responsible way.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is there any way in which each blind man could have figured out, without guessing, what was before them without seeking epistemic friction, for example by reflecting on the evidence available to them from their own point of view?
2. What is the relationship between *epistemic friction* and *intellectual ahimsā*?
3. Using examples, explain the difference between epistemic correction and completion.
4. What is the difference between *positional inquiry* and *intellectual ahimsā*?
5. Could it ever be bad to adopt the attitude of *intellectual ahimsā*?

Suggested Further Readings:

- Robbiano, C. & Scager, K. 2020. Cultivating Two Aspects of Intellectual Humility: Openness and Care. *Teaching Philosophy* 43.1: 47-69.
- Vaidya, A. 2018. Making the Case for Jaina Contributions to Critical Thinking. *Journal of World Philosophy* 3.1: 53-78.
- Long, J. 2013. *Jainism: An Introduction*. I.B. Tauris Publishing.
- Granoff, P. 2007. *The Forest of Thieves and the Magic Garden: An Anthology of Medieval Jain Stories*. London: Penguin.
- Padmarajah, Y. J. 1986. *A Comparative Study of the Jaina Theories of Reality and Knowledge*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass – Lala Sundar Lala Jain Research Series.

Index Terms:

Intellectual ahimsā is a dispositional attitude of open inclusiveness⁷ to distinct points of view, which is grounded in (i) an acknowledgement of one's own epistemic limitations coupled with (ii) a desire for epistemic friction for the purposes of understanding and knowledge production via correction or completion.

Epistemic Friction is what happens when two or more inquirers on a specific question exchange points of view, evidence, or counterclaims to each person's position on a question for the purposes of improving their own epistemic position towards the question.

Epistemic Correction is what happens when one inquirer's position on a question is corrected by another, usually as a consequence of epistemic friction, without the use of the other person's perspective being used. The correction occurs as a consequence of another person pointing out that from one's own perspective they have made a mistake.

Epistemic Completion is what happens when one inquirer's evidence for answering a question is completed by another, usually as a consequence of epistemic friction.

⁷ The term 'open inclusiveness' that I am using is derived from consideration of the work of Jeffery Long's "Anekānta and Ahimsā: A Jain Philosophy of Universal Acceptance" The Virchand Gandhi Lecture, April 18, 2013, Claremont School of Theology.