

On the Identity of the Liberated Jīva in Jainism

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The philosophical mind is not satiated by doctrinal assertions. The philosopher requires rational explanations. As a student of Western philosophy studying Jainism I have had some difficulty coming to understand the Jaina concept of the soul, particularly as regards its identity. I presume that the difficulties I have faced are not uniquely my own for there seem to be some philosophical problems with the Jaina doctrine of the soul. In this paper I will explore what I take to be the problems with the identity of the soul in Jainism. Further, I will demonstrate that Jaina philosophy has a solution to most, but not all, of these problems and their caveats. Essentially this paper has two purposes: 1) to demonstrate that the identity of the soul in Jainism is coherent, and 2) to put forward philosophical problems with the identity of the soul in Jainism that remain unsolved.

Before we discuss the philosophical problems of the soul in Jainism, it is prudent to first discuss the Jaina concept of the soul. In Jainism, each individual soul (*jīva* from now on) is understood as a substance. Now there are two ways of understanding this term 'substance'. Jains describe substance as identity in difference¹ whereas "when philosophers discuss 'substance', [.. it] is the concept of object, or thing,"² or that which is capable of independent existence. Both of these understandings of 'substance' work for the Jaina concept of *jīva*, however as the identity of the *jīva* is concerned, we will be using the philosophical understanding of substance for two reasons: 1) defining substance as identity in difference is problematic in that it posits both a substance and the modes of the substance; thus defining substance in terms of substance, and 2) because Jainism does in fact endorse the distinct

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individuality of *jīvas* that do not depend on anything exterior to themselves for their existence.

Before we continue, I feel it is necessary to first defend my above assertion that ‘identity in difference’ is not a valid definition of a substance. I claimed above that such a definition posits both substance and its modifications. Dr. S.C. Jain seems to agree when he states, “The same entity has to be doubly designated as permanent and impermanent, the substance and the modes.”³ Dr. Jain is correct when referring to entities but seems to conflate ‘substance’ with ‘thing’. If we are talking about ‘things’, we must acknowledge that they change. However, if we are defining things (entities such as *jīvas*) as substances, then we ambiguatize the terms ‘substance’ and ‘thing’. If we were to adopt Dr. Jain’s explanation of identity in difference, we would be equating substances with things, and then defining things in terms of substance, or the other way around. Now, to be fair, Dr. Jain finds reason for his position in the Jaina notion of *anekāntavāda*, a topic too complex to delve into here. Let it be sufficient to know that *anekāntavāda* remains an inconsistently championed concept in the literature. That is to say, a consensus has not been reached that sufficiently explains the concept.⁴

Now the term ‘*jīva*’ is ambiguous, referring both to the pure, liberated, *jīva* and to the obstructed, mundane *jīva*. The mundane *jīva* is embodied and bound by *karmas* whereas the liberated *jīva* is free of *karmas*.⁵ Mundane *jīvas* are also said to have extrinsic attributes such as mood, body, and age whereas liberated *jīvas* do not.⁶ Because it is the intrinsic attributes that matter for identity, for the sake of simplicity we will be focusing here on liberated *jīva*. So what is a *jīva*? Let us look at what Jaina scholars have had to say about the identity of the *jīva*.

Dr. Jyoti Prasad Jain identifies the *jīva* as knowledge itself.⁷ This is, however, not precisely the case for Dr. Jain also states that the soul’s nature is *ahimsā* (non-harm).⁸ Dr. Helmuth Von Glasenapp identifies the *jīva* in terms of its characteristics. He maintains that the *jīva*’s primary characteristic is cognition⁹ but the *jīva* also has

the characteristics of *vīrya* (energy or activity),¹⁰ and *samyag-darśana* (right belief).¹¹ Dr. Padmanabh S. Jaini claims there are innumerable qualities of a *jīva*, four or which are central: “perception, knowledge, bliss and energy.”¹² The *Tattvārthasūtra* claims that “functional consciousness/ sentience is the differentia (distinguishing characteristic) of the soul.”¹³ And the *Dravyasaṃgraha* claims that the sentient substance (*jīva*), “from the absolute point of view is that which has consciousness.”¹⁴ The *Dravyasaṃgraha* also states that the definition of the soul is right faith.¹⁵ Though clearly there is no single, set definition of *jīva* in the literature, one can see that the identity of a *jīva* involves faith, activity, knowledge, bliss, and cognition. In fact the strict identity of a *jīva* is perfection in these qualities.

Now the primary problem I am raising regarding the identity of the *jīva* has to do with Leibniz’s Law, also known as the identity of indiscernibles. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains:

The Identity of Indiscernibles is a principle of analytic ontology first explicitly formulated by Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Section 9 (Loemker 1969: 308). It states that no two distinct substances exactly resemble each other. This is often referred to as ‘Leibniz’s Law’ and is typically understood to mean that no two objects have exactly the same properties...¹⁶

From this principle an argument can be made for shared identity of all *jīvas*, especially after liberation when external properties do not differentiate *jīvas* from one another. Such an argument would (1) establish that discerning properties do not exist as regards the intrinsic attributes of a *jīva* and (2) that liberated *jīvas* do not have extrinsic properties, and are therefore indistinguishable. It would follow that (3) *jīvas* lose their identity upon liberation. Such an argument would not be hard to construct. In fact there are scholars who endorse both 1 and 2 above and would therefore be logically committed to 3. Subhash Jain makes such claims in his book *Rebirth of the Karma Doctrine*.¹⁷ Perhaps this is why the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, for example, has made the claim that

personal identity is lost for Jains upon liberation.¹⁸ Jyoti Prasad Jain seems to encourage such a conclusion when he claims that all souls are alike.¹⁹ The Āgama *Bhagavatī* or *Vyākhyā-prajñapti*, as reported by J. C. Sikdar, equates the soul of an elephant and that of an insect, claiming that they are the same.²⁰ Also adding to the confusion is the Jaina position that “all diversity among beings, though real, exists simply on the level of modes.”²¹ Now ‘the same’ is understood by Jains to mean similarity rather than identity, but the amount of evidence that suggests identity rather than similarity is striking. Let us consider what John E. Cort has had to say about the issue:²²

The biography of each Jina is marked by five beneficial events known as *kalyāṇakas*: conception, birth, mendicant initiation, enlightenment, and bodily liberation at the moment of death. The ontological content of these events is largely identical in the life of each of the Jinās. The biography of each Jina, therefore, is not the story of a unique life, but is rather an ever-repeated story. [...] At a fundamental level, nothing new ever happens in the universal history, and the identities of the Jinās elide into a composite identity as the Jina, God. The individual qualities of an individual that go to make up a personality, what Heinrich Zimmer (1951: 234,41) calls the “mask of the personality”, are part of the material world (*ajīva*), part of the realm of *karma*, not part of the eternal soul (*jīva*), and so are shucked off along with the body when the Jina attains final liberation at the moment of death.²³

Cort understands the identity of the Jinās (liberated *jīvas* in Jaina history), and therefore the identity of the liberated *jīva*, as singular. What differentiates the *jīvas*, in Cort’s view, are inconsequential details (extrinsic attributes). It seems then that Cort would agree that *jīvas* lose their identity upon liberation. It should be taken into consideration when evaluating the identity of the *jīvas* that the lives of the Jinās in Jaina historical accounts are documented and thought to be valuable but virtually nothing is said about their identity as individuals after liberation. Perhaps that is because they share an identity as Cort has stated or perhaps it is because they lose their identity upon liberation. In any case, this is not the case according to

many Jains.

It has been said that upon liberation *jīvas* are like cups of water that mix together yet somehow retain their identity.²⁴ Now we will see how that is possible. We have now seen that it is not uncommon for Jaina scholars to identify the *jīva* as one rather than many. Reasoning seems to suggest that the *jīvas* either lose their identity upon liberation or never had a unique identity to begin with, but many Jains insist that *jīvas* retain their identity. How is this possible? Leibniz's Law demands that the individual liberated *jīvas* have some discernability, or unique properties by which they can be differentiated. So what properties are unique to the individual *jīva*? The mundane *jīvas* clearly have discernable properties such as their unique bodies, but the liberated *jīvas* seem to be identical with one another. So the question becomes: do liberated *jīvas* have unique properties? There are two answers in the literature to this question: 1) it is maintained that *jīvas* retain the form of their last body,²⁵ and 2) it is maintained that the extrinsic properties of one's past history differentiate them.²⁶ As will be demonstrated, the first of these two responses is philosophically problematic, though doctrinally sound; the second response is the most coherent response but will prove to be more complicated than it seems at first glance.

Jīvas are said to retain the form of the last body they occupied. This form functions as the property by which liberated *jīvas* are differentiated. Liberated *jīvas*, from this perspective, are identical in nature, but differentiable from one another and therefore individuals. This response seems like a good solution to the problem raised above but it is rather complicated and warrants clarification. Jaina cosmological doctrine claims that upon liberation a *jīva* immediately migrates to the upmost portion of the cosmos, which has a distinct shape and size.²⁷ It is the fixed size of the home of the liberated *jīvas* that seems to force a position for the Jaina philosopher. At first glance it seems that the Jaina philosopher must choose between a fixed form of the liberated *jīva* or the fixed size of the cosmic realm that they inhabit. It seems that the Jaina philosopher must make this choice of doctrinal interaction with the

belief in beginningless past.

According to Jaina cosmology, the universe was never created and has existed for an infinite past. The Jains also maintain that there are repeating periods of incline and decline that repeat their cycle for infinite time in the past and the future. Each period produces 48 Tīrthaṅkaras, 24 in the upward part of the cycle and 24 on the downward. Now if 48 Tīrthaṅkaras are produced every time cycle and there are infinite time cycles, then there are infinite multiples of 48 Tīrthaṅkaras. Infinite multiples of 48 Tīrthaṅkaras yields an infinite number of Tīrthaṅkaras, each retaining the form of its last bodily incarnation. If there is an infinite number of Tīrthaṅkaras and each has a form then one would think that they would take up an infinite amount of space. No matter how small the form of each Tīrthaṅkara, so long as they are infinite in number, it would seem that they cannot be restricted to a determinate space regardless of how large the space may be. Thus it appears that *jīvas* either retain a form after liberation or the space that they occupy is not fixed.

There is, however, a problem with the above position. Ana Bajzelj has pointed out that the form of the liberated *jīvas* may overlap.²⁸ This is a very keen insight to the problem, but requires some explanation. One might object that an infinite number of center points would produce an infinite special volume, but this is not the case. If the forms of the liberated *jīvas* overlap then they are, according to contemporary mathematics, able to occupy a fixed volume so long as their center points remained distinct from one another and the form of the largest *jīva* was the same size or smaller than the special volume in which it resides. In mathematical theories of infinity, there can be a fixed space with infinite points. Let us take a moment to properly understand this solution.

In order to fully understand the above solution we must take a mathematical detour. What we must accomplish here, albeit in an unjustifiably short amount of time, is the modern mathematical understanding of orders of infinity. Of course to understand the modern mathematical understanding of orders of infinity we must

first understand the modern mathematical understanding of infinity:

infinity, in mathematics, that which is not finite. A sequence of numbers, a_1, a_2, a_3, \dots , is said to “approach infinity” if the numbers eventually become arbitrarily large, i.e., are larger than any number, N , that may be chosen at will. The term infinity is used in a somewhat different sense to refer to a collection of objects that does not contain a finite number of objects. For example, there are infinitely many points on a line, and Euclid demonstrated that there are infinitely many prime numbers. The German mathematician Georg Cantor showed that there are different orders of infinity, the infinity of points on a line being of a greater order than that of prime numbers (see transfinite number).²⁹

So the question that we are challenged with is whether or not the infinite number of liberated *jīvas* is a greater infinity than the infinite number of points in a fixed volume of space. As it turns out, according to contemporary mathematical understanding, they are in fact identical, demonstrated here:

transfinite number, cardinal or ordinal number designating the magnitude (power) or order of an infinite set; the theory of transfinite numbers was introduced by Georg Cantor in 1874. The transfinite cardinal number \aleph_0 (aleph-null) is assigned to the countably infinite set of all positive integers $\{1, 2, 3, \dots, n, \dots\}$. This set can be put in a one-to-one correspondence with many other infinite sets, e.g., the set of all negative integers $\{-1, -2, -3, \dots, -n, \dots\}$, the set of all even positive integers $\{2, 4, 6, \dots, 2n, \dots\}$, and the set of all squares of positive integers $\{1, 4, 9, \dots, n^2, \dots\}$; thus, in contrast to finite sets, two infinite sets, one of which is a subset of the other, can have the same transfinite cardinal number, in this case, \aleph_0 . It can be proved that all countably infinite sets, among which are the set of all rational numbers (any number that can be expressed as a ratio of two integers e.g. $1/10, 2/$

35987, \bar{e}) and the set of all algebraic numbers, have the cardinal number \aleph_0 . Since the union of two countably infinite sets is a countably infinite set, $\aleph_0 + \aleph_0 = \aleph_0$; moreover, $\aleph_0 \cdot \aleph_0 = \aleph_0$, so that in general, $n \cdot \aleph_0 = \aleph_0$ and $\aleph_0^n = \aleph_0$, where n is any finite number. It can also be shown, however, that the set of all real numbers (includes irrational numbers such as π or the square root of 2), designated by c (for “continuum”), is greater than \aleph_0 ; the set of all points on a line and the set of all points on any segment of a line are also designated by the transfinite cardinal number c . An even larger transfinite number is 2^c , which designates the set of all subsets of the real numbers, i.e., the set of all $\{a,b\}$ -valued functions whose domain for a and b is the real numbers. Transfinite ordinal numbers are also defined for certain ordered sets, two such being equivalent if there is a one-to-one correspondence between the sets, which preserves the ordering. The transfinite ordinal number of the positive integers is designated by ω ³⁰

Thus Bajzelj has her point. An infinite number of *jīvas* can occupy a fixed amount of space so long as their centerpoints are distinct from one another, their forms overlap, and the size of the largest form is not larger than the space it occupies. The addition of any number to \aleph_0 is still \aleph_0 . That is, no matter how many *jīvas* are liberated, the volume of their residence does not have to change to accommodate them.

There remains, however, another issue with the liberated *jīvas* retaining their identity through retaining their form. The form of the liberated *jīva* remains an extrinsic property and extrinsic properties do not seem to matter for identity because they are accidental. That is to say it is logically possible that the form could have been very different, even identical to that of another *jīva* and therefore functions only as a method of differentiation between different substances, but says nothing when applied to a singular substance.

Now there remains a solution to the above issue. Oddly enough the solution to this issue is the same as the solution to the next. As I will demonstrate, if external properties are made internal, the problem disappears.

The next solution I propose to the problem of the identity of liberated *jīvas* is that *jīvas* are differentiated due to their personal histories as well as their relations to other substances. That is, each *jīva* has the unique property of that particular *jīva*'s past incarnations, locations, associations, etc. There seem to be two objections to this claim. First, one might object that one's personal history is irrelevant after liberation for it is upon liberation that they lose their external attributes and thereby become identical. Such an argument is correct from the perspective of time, however we have to consider the relation of time to identity as it is conceived by the Jains. Second, as per the previous solution to *jīva* identity, one might object that differentiation remains insufficient for identity because what matters for identity is intrinsic properties and one's history is accidental. As we will see, the internalizing of extrinsic properties will solve this problem.

Now, as per the first objection raised above, according to the Jains, both time and *jīvas* are substances. But this is not the whole picture. There are in fact two kinds of time: ultimate and relative. Ultimate time is a substance and is merely the capacity for change. Relative time is qualitative, or noticeable/empirical time, that results from the relations between objects. Because substances are capable of independent existence, the identity of any particular *jīva* has to be established independent of other substances such as ultimate time. But what about relative time? Again *jīvas* being substances entails that they are capable of independent existence i.e. existing independently of all other objects. Thus the identity of the *jīva* must be identifiable without relation to other objects and therefore without reference to relative time either. This entails that identity cannot change through time. A *jīva* cannot lose its identity at some point in time because it has an identity that is independent of time. The *Tattvārthasūtra* explains:

The emancipated souls can be differentiated with reference to the region, time, realm of birth, gender or dress, form, conduct, self-enlightenment, enlightened by others, knowledge, stature, interval, number and numerical strength of the liberated soul in these eleven gateways.³¹

This means that we differentiate liberated *jīvas* based on the details of their lives as well as their relation to other substances such as time and other *jīvas*. Now one might think this solution unsatisfactory because in experience we only know *jīvas* through their relations to other substances. That is, if the identity of a *jīva* lies outside of time and we are only capable of seeing in time then we never see a *jīva*. One might well ask “Where are these *jīvas* of which you speak? Are they nowhere?” It is true we only have empirical experience of a *jīva*’s momentary time slices and therefore do not ever encounter a *jīva* in its totality, but this is not problematic for my position. Firstly, not seeing a *jīva* in its entirety at any point in time is like never seeing the cosmos at any point in time. Just because we don’t see it in its totality does not entail that we do not interact with it and come to know it. Next time you are drinking a cup of tea ask yourself if there is a bottom to the cup that has an identity outside of your current experience. Furthermore, the above objection results from a categorical mistake. I remind such critics that the identity of the *jīva* is an ontological posit rather than an empirical derivation. Explaining how we come to know a *jīva* is a different task than making sense of the identity of a *jīva*. It is perfectly coherent to differentiate *jīvas* based on their past histories.

So our second objection, that if identity depends solely on intrinsic properties then, despite our ability to differentiate *jīvas* based on their form or location, we cannot differentiate the identities of *jīvas* upon liberation, there is a solution. The solution to this problem is, rather ironically, a solution put forward in Leibniz’s philosophy. If all external relations are understood as necessary internal relations, then the solutions presented above work. If the form and/or history of *jīvas* are different and also intrinsic properties, then liberated *jīvas* are not identical. This, however, yields for the Jaina

philosopher the same philosophical issues that Leibnizian philosophy faces. Leibniz solves this problem with an appeal to a creator God that is necessarily independent of the world, a position that Jains would surely take issue with.³²

Jaina philosophers, so long as they adhere to Leibniz's law and also maintain that internal properties are what matter for identity, must solve this philosophical issue. The only other option for the Jaina philosopher is to disregard accidental properties and/or reject Leibniz's law.

Now, the project I have undertaken here is by no means complete. I have merely sketched a few problems with the identity of *jīvas* leaving much more to be done. For example the identity of the mundane *jīva* has been largely ignored, as well as a discussion on the acceptability of utilizing Leibnizian monads as a comparison with *jīvas*. Also some more discussion of *anekāntavāda* might help clarify how *jīvas* can be understood both as singular and as multiple. My humble contribution with this paper has been to demonstrate to the confused student of Jainism that the Jaina ontology of the self is coherent. As a second contribution, this project also acts as an impetus for Jaina philosophy to reconcile the issue I have raised above with the ultimate identity of the *jīva*.

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3. Jain, *Structure and Function*, 32.
4. An example of different notions of *anekāntavāda* is whether or not the concept is metaphysical or empirical.
5. The Jaina concept of *karma* is very different from other traditions. I will not go into the details of Jaina *karma* theory here, but readers who are interested in learning about Jaina *karma* are advised to read Dr. Helmuth Von Glasenapp's book *Doctrine of Karman in Jaina Philosophy*.
6. Subhash Jain, *Rebirth of the Karma Doctrine* (Mumbai: Hindi

- Granth Karyalay, 2010) 16. This is not entirely true. As we shall see, liberated *jīvas* may retain a form upon liberation.
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 8. *Ibid.* 118.
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 10. *Ibid.* 45.
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 16. Forrest, Peter, "The Identity of Indiscernibles", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/identity-indiscernible/>>.
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