

ARTICLES

Tearing the Soul Free from The Body's Hold: A Comparison of Jainism and Orphism

Brooke R. Bentley^{1a}¹ University of North Texas

Keywords: Jainism, Orphism, dualism

<https://doi.org/10.12794/journals.sujjs.v1i2.300>

*Samyak: An Undergraduate Journal of Jain Studies*Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2025

This essay explores the range of fascinating similarities and differences between Jainism and the ancient Greek mystery sect of Orphism. Both Jainism and Orphism uphold a strict dualism between soul and body, attributing to the soul all qualities of life and considering the body a mere material vessel. Both traditions also hold similar views on transmigration or reincarnation. However, Jainism's overt focus on non-violence sharply contrasts with the presence of violence and ritualized frenzy or mania in the Orphic rites. These similarities and difference suggest, nonetheless, the potential for continued research on connections between these two spiritual paths.

The dualistic philosophy of the body and soul offers an interesting philosophical perspective. Jainism, an Indian ascetic school of thought, boasts this philosophy. Claiming that the soul is a person's consciousness, while the body is a vessel of senses through which the soul experiences the mundane world.¹ Orphism, a cultic sect of ancient Greek religion, holds a notion of the soul that is strikingly similar to that of Jainism. The soul in Orphism is thought to be what makes people who they are, while the body is merely a shell.² Related to this view of the soul, there are considerable similarities between Jain and ancient Orphic thought.

In both philosophies, the soul is considered to be the aspect that makes one alive, while the body is simply a means for the soul to experience life. Beyond this, Orphic and Jain thought are similar in their beliefs of the transmigration of the soul, reincarnation, and seeking purification from spiritual impurity. As such, this suggests the presence of philosophical similarities between the two schools of thought that provides a provocative comparison.

^a Brooke R. Bentley specializes in history and classical studies at UNT and completed this essay for PHIL 3630 Jainism in the spring semester of 2025.

¹ Shah, *Jaina Philosophy and Religion*, "Essentials of Jaina Philosophy."

² Athanassakis and Wolkow, *The Orphic Hymns*, "Introduction."

Defining Orphism

Orphism, as mentioned prior, is a cultic, mystery sect of Greek religion and philosophy that offers a perspective on the soul that contrasts with classical Homeric mythology, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.³ In typical Homeric mythology, the soul and consequently the afterlife are seen as bleak, lacking any sense of salvation or liveliness.⁴ The soul is a gray, lifeless entity that is more akin to a shadow than it is to a sentient being. Much of this thought is informed by depictions of the underworld as told by figures like Achilles and Circe in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Both epic poems uplift the greatness of Heroism in life, and as such diminish the afterlife as bleak. The dead have little to no agency other than lingering feelings such as anger or sadness from their lives. Despite the canon of Homer, mainstream Greek religion of the time does not view the afterlife as so lifeless. The dead and afterlife were thought to have been livelier than this, as the dead themselves were thought to have carried on their lives even in death. Moreover, the dead were often called upon by the living to provide aid by granting blessings or curses.⁵

Orphism shares with mainstream Greek religion this livelier take on the soul and afterlife. Firstly, though, Orphism must be defined in its ancient context. Orphism is not a strict label with consistent rules or practices, rather it is more of a loose definition connected to similar vague ideas surrounding the afterlife and soul. Typically, these ideas are associated with Orpheus in one way or another, though that is not necessarily a requirement for something to be considered Orphic. What defines Orphism, though, is its distance from the mainstream ancient Greek religion, its possession of extraordinary ideas about purity, the soul, connection to the divine, and the strangeness of its practices and beliefs.⁶

Despite Orphism's general fluidity, scholars agree upon several defining characteristics.⁷ These include a dualistic belief in the soul and body, a blood guilt present in all humans that is akin to Christian ideas of sin, the purification from guilt in order to achieve salvation, and a cycle of

3 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *The Orphic Hymns*, "Introduction," xiii-xiv; Edmonds, "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond: The Soul in Plato, Homer, and the Orphica." The notion of "mystery" here refers to the fact that the Orphics kept their exact practices and beliefs secret. As a result, the nature and origins of Orphic beliefs is hotly debated by scholars.

4 Edmonds, "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond," section "The Homeric Afterlife."

5 Edmonds, "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond," section "The Homeric Afterlife." The Homeric Greek afterlife is far more nuanced than explained here. Aside from what is described by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the afterlife is not nearly as bleak, the dead were thought to have continued their jobs while living in death, maintained social structures, and could even be called upon by the living to inflict blessings and curses. Furthermore, it seems that those who were favored by the gods kept this favor in death, while those who had offended the gods would be punished in the afterlife.

6 Edmonds, "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond," section "Redefining Ancient Orphism."

7 There is much scholarly debate surrounding the core beliefs of Orphism, their origins, and what is and is not fabricated or misinterpreted by modern scholars. This debate does not fit into the topic of this paper, but for further reading on this look into the work of Edmonds, "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond."

reincarnation and transmigration of the soul.⁸ These core beliefs informed the Orphic initiation process, which involved initiates reciting the eighty-seven Orphic Hymns accompanied by ritualistic practices and sacrifice. By engaging in these rituals, the initiates would cleanse themselves from the blood guilt and other *miasma*, spiritual pollution, that would prevent them from gaining an optimal afterlife.⁹ In these rituals, it is thought that the initiates would undergo a ritualistic form of *katabasis*, that is the process of going into the underworld or death and being reborn at the end of the ritual.

The *Orphic Hymns* builds upon this practice and the view of death and purification. Notably in the last hymn “Hymn 87 to Death,” the nature of the soul–body relationship is explicitly stated.

“Your sleep tears the soul
free from the body’s hold,
whenever you undo
nature’s powerful bonds,”¹⁰

From these lines, it is inferred that the soul is what possesses the body and makes it alive. Without the soul, the body is unable to function as it would if it were alive. As this hymn is the last hymn of the *Orphic Hymns* it would have been recited at the end of the initiation ritual. The ritual would have taken an entire night to complete, and the sun would have been rising as the initiates finished their rites, creating an incredibly symbolic moment wherein the initiates were reborn knowing that their souls would be able to pass from the body into an afterlife that was favorable.¹¹

Furthermore, these lines bring to mind the Platonic idea surrounding the soul, that is, that the body is a prison, garrison, or tomb in which the soul is contained.¹² The Orphics had influenced Plato’s notion of the relationship between body and soul, as this idea is credited to them by Socrates in Plato’s work, *Cratylus*. In this work, Socrates asserts that the Orphics believe the body was a prison for the soul that kept it safe until it was time to pay penance for the blood guilt of humanity.¹³

8 Edmonds, “A Lively Afterlife and Beyond,” section “Redefining Ancient Orphism”; Athanassakis and Wolkow *The Orphic Hymns*, “Introduction,” xiii–xiv.

9 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, xiii–xv; Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 124–127.

10 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 66–67.

11 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 218–220.

12 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 218–220. Plato’s *Cratylus* dives into this notion as Socrates ponders the meaning of the Greek word for body, *soma*. He draws parallels to other similar sounding Greek words as well as other understandings of the body and soul relationship.

13 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 218.

It should be noted here that the blood guilt characteristic of Orphism was similar to but not the same as Christian sin. Humanity was thought to carry the guilt of the Titans who had slaughtered Dionysos, the head god of Orphism.¹⁴ This guilt would linger with humanity and haunt their souls until death unless the soul was ritualistically purified from the guilt.¹⁵ Without purification from the heavy *miasma* of blood guilt, an Orphic initiate would not be able to attain a favorable afterlife. An unfavorable afterlife, depending on the individual would vary. For the average person, they would simply not be able to reincarnate and their soul would remain in the underworld. If one had earned the scorn of the gods, though, they would be doomed for punishment in Tartarus, the place of the damned in the underworld. However, souls can avoid this through purification from *miasma*, which allowed for the soul to enter Elysium, the afterlife of the blessed dead.¹⁶

Considering its relatively loose definition, the practices characteristic to Orphism were likely varied and are up for scholarly debate. As such, some of the key practices and beliefs as discussed here are themselves likely fluid in nature, differing according to time periods.¹⁷ Despite this, though, the Orphic notion of the soul is fairly concrete. The soul is a separate entity from the body that is imprisoned or safeguarded within it. After death, the soul is expected to be punished for the blood guilt it is tainted with. However, the Orphism offers salvation from this unfavorable afterlife through its rituals. By partaking in Orphic ritual, the soul is able to enter into Elysium and reincarnate into a new life. Within Elysium, the soul is able to move on and reincarnate into its next life.¹⁸

The Structure of the Soul in Jainism

Jainism is an ancient ascetic philosophical practice from India, which primarily focuses on obtaining freedom from worldly desires, misery, and bondage through a rigorous lifestyle.¹⁹ Worldly bonds manifest as karma, which in Jainism is a subtle particle that one accumulates through all positive and negative actions. Moreover, the aspect of Jainism that is most central is its dualistic philosophy on the relationship between the soul or life, known as *jīva*, and body. The body is, for all intents and purposes, inert matter

¹⁴ Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 124–127.

¹⁵ Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 218–220.

¹⁶ Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 218–220. The presence of *miasma* or blood guilt does not seem to hinder one's ability to reincarnate, nor what they will reincarnate into.

¹⁷ Edmonds, "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond," section "Redefining Ancient Orphism."

¹⁸ Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 218–220; Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, xiii–xv.

¹⁹ For a thorough overview, see Sancheti and Bhandari, *First Steps to Jainism* (Part 1).

when left without the soul. The soul is what allows for the body to operate and generate sensory experience. Without the soul, the body lacks its senses, cognition, desires, and all feeling, and hence the body completely insentient.²⁰

A notable quality of the soul is its ability to know and to feel pleasure and pain.²¹ Due to this, the soul is the consciousness that makes a being alive. The ability to know and to feel both pleasure and pain comes from the soul and is what makes it perceivable.²² Desire, cognition, and feeling are all qualities that are not present in a dead body but are found in a live one. Thus, this indicates the presence of a soul, which allows for the body to function in its natural manner. Furthermore, the ability to remember things of the past is a quality of the soul that indicates its presence.²³ The ability to feel, remember, and perceive oneself indicates the presence of a soul within living beings.

Souls themselves are infinite in the most literal definition—there are as many souls as there are samayas, the smallest, most numerous, and incomprehensible unit of time.²⁴ This means that the number of souls at any given time is so numerous it is beyond human comprehension. Additionally, souls are simultaneously beginningless and endless and cannot be erased or made. There will never be an instance where the number of souls in existence is zero.²⁵ To account for the sheer number of them, souls can reincarnate into any conscious body whether it be an immovable body with only one sense, a microscopic creature, a plant or animal, or a human person. Souls are found in all conscious beings.²⁶ The ultimate goal of Jainism, then, is to free the soul from the cycle of reincarnation and to reduce harm to attain this.

To obtain a soul's enlightenment, one must shed one's karma and cease the accumulation of it.²⁷ Karma is a subtle particle that causes both the pleasure and the pain experienced by the soul. It collects on the soul and sticks to it, influencing what happens to the soul in its current life as well as its next.²⁸ To reduce the flow of karma to the soul, meditation is done to shed, remove, and keep karma away. Even if one is unable to achieve enlightenment, the practice of ahimsā remains crucial. Jains keep up a non-violent lifestyle regardless, as the type of karma one attracts influences one's next life.²⁹

²⁰ Shah, *Jaina Philosophy and Religion*, 3–8.

²¹ Jain, *Structure and Functions of Soul in Jainism*, 157–159.

²² Jain, *Structure and Functions of Soul*, 157–159.

²³ Shah, *Jaina Philosophy and Religion*, 3–8.

²⁴ Shah, *Jaina Philosophy and Religion*, 8.

²⁵ Kachhara, *Jaina Doctrine of Karma: The Religious and Scientific Dimensions*, “The Soul”; Shah, *Jaina Philosophy and Religion*, 3–8.

²⁶ Sancheti and Bhandari, *First Steps*, “Step 1: The Universe—Six Substances (The Dravya).”

²⁷ Kachhara, *Jaina Doctrine of Karma*, “The Karma.”

²⁸ Shah, *Jaina Philosophy and Religion*, 3–8.

²⁹ Chapple, “Reincarnation: Mechanics, Narratives, and Implications.”

Practices of *ahiṃsā*, meaning non-injury, are performed by Jains in order to prevent the influx of bad karmas.³⁰ This includes a strict vegetarian diet and the practice of kindness towards all living creatures. As such, vows are upheld by Jains to maintain non-violence, to tell the truth, express sexual restraint, restrain one's mind and tongue, and to practice non-possession. By following these vows and meditating, karma is shed and repelled from the soul, which grants a Jain practitioner a higher chance of a favorable rebirth or in freedom from the cycle of reincarnation.³¹

In the last third of a Jain practitioner's life, the upkeep of *ahiṃsā* becomes strict. Extreme care to limit harm alongside rigorous fasting and a stricter diet is performed in order to secure one's chance at a favorable rebirth.³² In some cases for monks and nuns, if all karmas are shed at the time of death and a pious life is lived, one's soul will travel to Siddhaloka. This is a perfect space beyond the heavens where a soul is surrounded by itself in perfect bliss.³³ The feeling of bliss present in Siddhaloka is different from mundane notions of pleasure, as the blissful soul is fully departed from any mundane feeling. A freed soul feels neither pleasure nor pain.³⁴

Comparisons and Conclusions

Regarding the philosophy of the soul, Jainism and Orphism show several similarities. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, both practices share philosophical similarities in the ideas of the body as a vessel for the soul, reincarnation and transmigration of souls between the bodies, and wanting to rid oneself of and remain clean from spiritual impurity.

Despite their similarities, though, there are several glaring differences between Orphic and Jain practices. In order to fully comprehend the level of sameness between both, all aspects of their practices must be explored.

One of the most notable differences between Jainism and Orphism is the methods by which one obtains purity from spiritual uncleanness. In Orphism, one would rid themselves of *miasma* by engaging in *katharsis*, the ritual act of purifying oneself as described in an earlier section.³⁵ This act was likely the purpose of the Orphic initiation rituals, which involved frenzy and

30 Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions*, "Origins and Traditional Articulations of Ahiṃsā."

31 Chapple, *Nonviolence*, "Origins and Traditional Articulations of Ahiṃsā."

32 Chapple, "Reincarnation," 2.

33 Chapple, "Reincarnation," 6–7.

34 Jain, *Structure and Functions of Soul*, 166–167.

35 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, xiv.

ritualistic mania, animal sacrifices, and the act of *katabasis*.³⁶ Through these rituals, Orphics would ensure that they would gain afterlife in Elysium, the blissful afterlife of those favored by the gods, and continue to reincarnate.

Furthermore, the presence of violence in Orphic ritual is well known. Multiple hymns refer to violence and the maenads, the often-female followers of Dionysos who were known for engaging in violent acts while influenced by divine mania.³⁷ In both the hymn *To Dionysos* and the *Hymn to Dionysos Bassareus and Triennial*, the violence of the worship of Dionysos is explicitly stated through the descriptions of the god. Dionysos is referred to as “all-roaring,” “loud-roaring,” “frenzied,” “bull-faced,” and “warlike,” painting a picture of madness, revelry, and ritual frenzy.³⁸ This, combined with his position as the head god of the Orphics, as well as the physical and mental violence that would occur from rituals involving *katabasis* and divine mania, point to a stark contrast with the non-violent practices present in Jainism.

While the Orphics focused on obtaining spiritual purity and salvation in the afterlife through ritual, Jainism is quite the opposite. The central tenets of Jainism are, as discussed previously, relate non-violence, self-control, and penance for harmful actions.³⁹ Of these, *ahimsā* is the most central as it informs and is informed by the entirety of Jain practice. *Ahimsā* requires the respect for all living forms and life and extends to taking a vow to not commit any injury to all living beings.⁴⁰

In order to obtain enlightenment within Jainism, a monk must take vow to uphold *ahimsā*. Through rigorous meditation, diet, and maintaining non-possession, a Jain is able to follow these vows and obtain a better rebirth and potentially liberation. Jains believe that by adhering to vows of non-violence, upholding the truth and justice, not stealing, expressing restraint of passion, and holding no possessions one is able to stay on the path of *ahimsā*.⁴¹

Ultimately, Jainism and Orphism are similar in their philosophies on the soul and its relationship to the body. The notion of the body as a vessel, or in Orphism's case a tomb, garrison, or prison, for the soul to experience the mundane world through remains similar between the two. Moreover, there are similarities in both perspectives on reincarnation, both of which view

36 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, xiii–xv. Athanassakis claims on page xiii that the Orphics refrained from eating the flesh of animals and respecting animal lives. At the same time, though, both authors make note of the sacrifice of a “victim” during ritual acts, which was likely an animal. Although the Orphics probably did in some aspect maintain respect for animals, it is entirely possible that animals would be harmed in ritualistic activities.

37 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, xiii–xv. Several of the Orphic Hymns refer to the maenads, however for a comprehensive look at a primary source featuring the maenad's behavior see Euripides' *Bacchae*.

38 Athanassakis and Wolkow, *Orphic Hymns*, 27–28 and 39.

39 Sancheti and Bhandari, *First Steps*.

40 Chapple, *Nonviolence*, “Origins and Traditional Articulations of *Ahimsā*.”

41 Chapple, *Nonviolence*, “Origins and Traditional Articulations of *Ahimsā*.”

the next life of a soul as a consequence for the previous life.⁴² However, differences in the view of a favorable afterlife, the way in which one obtains this favorable afterlife, and the central values of the two philosophies remain incredibly opposed.

Published: October 01, 2025 CDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-NC-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0> and legal code at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

⁴² Edmonds, "A Lively Afterlife and Beyond," section "Conclusions"; Kachhara, *Jaina Doctrine of Karma*, "The Karma."

REFERENCES

- Athanassakis, Apostolos N., and Benjamin M. Wolkow. *The Orphic Hymns*. John Hopkins University Press, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421408811>.
- Chapple, Christopher Key. *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions*. State University of New York Press, 1993. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780791498774>.
- . “Reincarnation: Mechanics, Narratives, and Implications.” *Religions* 8, no. 11 (2017): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8110236>.
- Chrysanthou, Anthi. “Defining Orphism: The Beliefs, the Teletae and the Writings.” PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2017.
- Edmonds, Radcliffe G., III. “A Lively Afterlife and Beyond: The Soul in Plato, Homer, and the Orphica.” *Études Platoniciennes*, no. 11 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesplatoniciennes.517>.
- Jain, S. C. *Structure and Functions of Soul in Jainism*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith, 1999.
- Kachhara, N. “Jaina Doctrine of Karma: The Religious and Scientific Dimensions.” Accessed April 4, 2025. <https://jainworld.com/library/jain-books/books-on-line/jainworld-books-in-indian-languages/jaina-doctrine-of-karma/the-karma/>.
- Sancheti, Asoo Lal, and Manak Mal Bhandari. “First Steps to Jainism (Part 1).” Accessed January 19, 2025. <https://jainworld.com/library/jain-books/books-on-line/jainworld-books-in-indian-languages/first-steps-to-jainism-part-1/>.
- Shah, J. Nagin. *Jaina Philosophy and Religion*. Bhogilal Lehar Chand Institute of Ideology, 1998.
- Theoi.com. “Dionysus Myths 3.” Olympios. Accessed April 4, 2025. <https://www.theoi.com/Olympios/DionysosMyths3.html>.
- Waterfield, Robin. “Review of *Defining Orphism: The Beliefs, the Teletae and the Writings*, by Anthi Chrysanthou.” *Heythrop Journal*, 2023.