On the whole it may be said that reverence for the cow and passionate resistance to its slaughter are the most powerful links which bind together the chaotic complex of beliefs we designate by the name of Hinduism (Crooke 1912: 279).

J. C. Heesterman has suggested that the Indian doctrine of non-violence, *ahimsā*, might be awarded a prize as “the most threadbare topic in Indology” (Heesterman 1984: 119); for, despite its central place in Indian religions, the doctrine possesses a history that is best known for its elusiveness. Thus, scholars have variously proposed that *ahimsā* originates in the Indus Valley civilization (Alsdorf 1961: 53); within the *śramaṇa* traditions (Brown 1966: p. 56; Dumont 1970: 149; Smith 1990: 198); or, within the ancient Vedic-Brāhmaṇic tradition (Schmidt 1968; Heesterman 1984). Of these, the Indus Valley civilization represents the least satisfying possibility; because so little is known of its life and culture, as Heesterman has observed: “it simply means that we push the problem out of sight, into the limbo of an as yet undeciphered past” (Heesterman 1984: 120; see also, O’Flaherty 1980: 244). The *śramaṇa* traditions hold an obvious appeal here, for these traditions clearly do emphasize non-violence. However, precisely how these traditions arrived at non-violence is not clear: though it is consonant with their characteristic renunciatory behavior (see, further, Dumont 1970: 149), they seem to have adopted non-violence from Brāhmaṇic circles (see, Schmidt 1968: 627; Jacobi 1884: xxiii; Hopkins 1904: 456—7). In fact, citing Heesterman once again, the supposition of a *śramaṇa* origin leaves us with “the cumbersome conjectural history that supposes the overclever brahmans to have saved their position by simply taking over the idea from their competitors in an ‘if-you-cannot-beat-them-join-them’ move” (Heesterman 1984: 121). All this — in addition to the fact that the Vedic tradition alone is represented as the legitimizing force for religiously sanctioned
(“dharmic”) behavior of all sorts in the post-Vedic Hindu texts (e.g., the epics, lawbooks, and Purāṇas) — adds to the appeal of investigating the Vedic sphere, despite the overt violence of its central event, the sacrificial ritual, as the most likely source for the doctrine of non-violence.²

Hanns-Peter Schmidt has already carefully investigated the possibility that *ahimsā* originates in the Vedic sphere (Schmidt 1968). As Schmidt shows, the Vedic texts are replete with the attempt to *avoid* injury in the sacrifice, for in the karmic world of the ritual: “Killing and hurting creatures had undesirable consequences which must be eliminated” (Schmidt 1968: 645). To avoid the onus of violence the sacrificers employed “acts of appeasing” (*śānti*), though these seem to have been constituted of little more than verbal subterfuge: “When the tree that is to serve as the sacrificial post in the animal sacrifice is felled, precautionary measures are taken to prevent it from being injured: ‘O, plant, protect it,’ he (the *adhvaryu*) says in order to protect it” (Schmidt 1968: 647). Schmidt, however, acknowledges the gulf that exists between this “theory of the ritualists who believed in being able to compensate for every injury by magical means” (Schmidt 1968: 650) and the position of the renouncer, who seeks at all costs to actually *not injure*. In Schmidt’s view the interiorization of the sacrifice — a pattern seen with increasing frequency in the later strata of the Vedic texts (Brāhmaṇa and Upaniṣad) — bridges this gulf; for, the exclusion of the “other,” the victim, that occurs as part of the process of interiorization, “leads to the logical conclusion that injury to living beings had to be avoided altogether” (Schmidt 1968: 653; on the exclusion of the other in the Vedic ritual see also, Tull 1989: 35–6; 77–8; Heesterman, 1985: 33).

Schmidt’s argument provides an apparent explanation for the curious formulation later given to the prohibition against violence in the *Māñava-dharmaśāstra*. Here, the violence of the sacrifice is discussed against the background of meat-eating, which is a requisite part of the Vedic animal sacrifice. Those who fail to follow the demands of the sacrifice suffer dire consequences: officiants at the sacrifice who refuse to eat the victim’s meat are thus doomed to be reborn as animals — a fate these individuals are declared to suffer for twenty-one births (*MDh* 5.35). In what then seems to be a retreat from this position, the author of the lawbook goes on to decry meat-eating because of the violence it entails: “Meat can never be obtained without causing violence (*himsā*) to living creatures, and the killing of living creatures does not lead to heaven; thus, one should shun meat” (*MDh* 5.48). This paradox is “resolved” by the author’s declaration that abstention from meat (and so too, we must assume, the abjuration of sacrificial