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Anavatapta

► Anotatta
► Mānasarovara (Buddhism)

Anekāntavāda

► Relativity (Jainism)
► *Syādvāda* (Jainism)

Anekāntavāda (Jainism)

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Synonyms

Syādvāda; Relativity

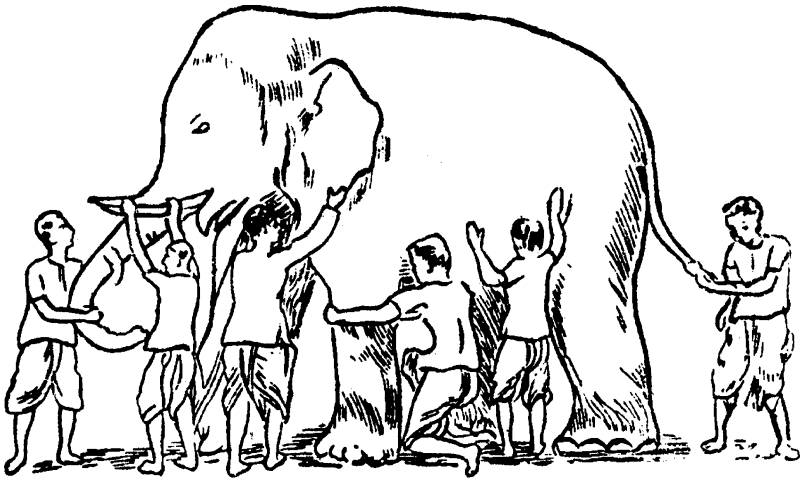
Definition

Anekāntavāda is the Jain metaphysical doctrine, which holds that reality is many-sided and that all entities are endowed with innumerable characteristics.

Introduction

It has been said that the central philosophy of Jainism is *anekāntavāda* [1]. Etymologically, *anekānta* (non-one-sidedness) is a negation of *ekānta* (one-sidedness). Philosophically, *anekāntavāda* is the Jain metaphysical doctrine that affirms the multifaceted and non-one-sided nature of reality. A common example used to explain this doctrine is the ancient Indic story of the blind men and the elephant (see Fig. 1). As the stories goes:

> There were six blind men who were brought before the king and asked to describe an elephant. One man, holding onto a leg, describes the elephant as being like a tree trunk. A second man, holding onto an ear, disagrees and suggests that the elephant is like a fan. A third man, who trips and falls into the side of the elephant, argues that the elephant is like a wall. A fourth man, holding on to the tail, retorts that the elephant is like a rope. The fifth man, grabbing a tusk, describes the elephant as similar to a spear. Finally, the sixth man, holding onto the trunk, describes the elephant like a giant snake. They continue to argue about their differing perspectives, until the king (who was watching this spectacle) interjects. He explains that each of the men was holding onto a piece of the enormous elephant and that ultimately, each of them was partially right.



***Anekāntavāda* (Jainism), Fig. 1** The elephant and the blind men

For Jains, this story is an essential example of engagement with the world. Philosophically speaking, Jains are (broadly construed) metaphysical realists. The elephant represents reality (i.e., the "way things are"). So, with respect to the story, there actually *is* an elephant; meaning, there actually is a real world that is encountered. This is an important point that distinguishes the Jain position of perspectivism from a form of idealism or relativism. There is a real world, and it really is experienced. But, as expressed by the doctrine of *anekāntavāda*, just as there are many sides to the elephant (a tail, a leg, a trunk, etc.), there are many sides to reality. Reality is many-sided. Not simply reality as a whole, but any given entity consists of innumerable attributes. And, much like the blind men who are experiencing the elephant from their limited perspective, all people encounter reality from within the confines of a limited perspective (*naya*) (see entry on ► *Nayavāda*).

Insofar as each blind man treats his limited perspective as the absolute, he commits the error of *ekāntavāda* (one-sidedness). That is, insofar as the assertion, "an elephant is like. . ." is intended as a rejection of the others perspectives, insofar as the man who describes the elephant like a wall, does so as a rejection of the man who describes the elephant like a rope, he commits the egregious error of one-sidedness. Instead, according to Jainism, each of the blind men is accurately describing reality, though only partially. So, the proper response, therefore, is to recognize the relative nature of one's own assertion and grant the validity of the perspective of others. And, when the many aspects of reality are brought together in a creative synthesis, one gets closer to describing the whole truth. *Anekāntavāda* is helpful, therefore, in extending an attitude of toleration toward those whose views are different than one's own. And, when taken seriously, it encourages the exploration of the perspectives of others as real possibilities where truth can be found. If these other perspectives are seen as having a piece of truth that is absent from one's own perspective, and it is recognized that the more perspectives one can synthesize into a single complex perspective, the closer one gets to the fullness of truth, then the perspectives of others can be seen as essential to the goal of getting closer to the full truth.

Origination, Destruction, and Permanence

In addition to simply insisting on the many-sided nature of reality, Jainism identifies existence as constitutive of three characteristics: (1) origination, (2) destruction, and (3) permanence. Nothing can be said to exist without all three characteristics. This principle is rooted deep within the Jain tradition and is even found in the most

authoritative of Jain scriptures – the *Tattvārthasūtra*. It reads as follows, "Existence is characterized by origination, disappearance (destruction) and permanence" (*Tattvārthasūtra* 5.30). But how can this be? How can reality be essentially permanent and impermanent? How can origination and destruction (i.e., impermanence) be essential characteristics of a reality that is also permanent? How can these contradictory characteristics both be true of existence? Well, the *Tattvārthasūtra* answers this question, saying "(The contradictory characteristics are established) from different points of view" (*Tattvārthasūtra* 5.32). More specifically, in the case of existence, it is a matter of distinguishing between permanent substances and impermanent modes (*Tattvārthasūtra* 5.42). From the perspective of substance, the existent object is permanent. But, from the standpoint of mode, the existent object is characterized by origination and destruction.

One story used to explain this phenomenon is that of the gold crown. As it goes, a family heirloom (a gold crown) was melted down and turned into a necklace. When this happened, one family member was distraught and mourned the destruction of the heirloom, for the crown was no more. Another family member was excited about the origination of the new necklace, which has been created, while a third family recognized the continued existence of the gold crown, insofar as the substance from which the necklace was formed is the same substance in which the crown had existed – the same gold. From three different perspectives, this act of melting down the crown and creating a necklace can be seen as either origination, destruction, or permanence. And, from the Jain perspective of *anekāntavāda*, all three are correct, albeit partially so.

Like the crown and the necklace, all existent objects can be characterized by origination, destruction, and permanence depending on the perspective one takes. And, to understand the many-sided nature of complex reality, one must acknowledge all three as representative of existing objects. In doing so, origination, destruction, and permanence are no longer seen as exclusive of each other, but mutually dependent characteristics of reality.

Knowing the Many Sides of Reality

To be clear, *anekāntavāda*, as a metaphysical doctrine, is a doctrine about the nature of reality. As such, *anekāntavāda* itself does not provide a theory of knowledge or dialectics (unfortunately, this distinction is not always clear in Jain writings). Hence, Jains conjoin the doctrine of *anekānta* with two corollaries: (1) *nayavāda* (the epistemological corollary) and (2) *syādvāda* (the corresponding dialectic of predication). If reality is truly complex and many-sided, in what sense can anyone be said to "know" reality? This is where the doctrine of *nayavāda* comes into play.

According to *nayavāda*, the knower approaches reality from a limited and particular standpoint. Since reality is many-sided, there are many ways to approach reality (via its many sides). From the metaphysical doctrine of a complex reality with innumerable attributes flows an epistemology which considers knowledge of an object incomplete insofar as it fails to account for all sides of that object. For this reason, the doctrine of *nayavāda* is described as a doctrine of standpoints. These standpoints (or perspectives) represent the many ways that one can approach reality.

Apart from omniscience, all viewpoints are non-absolute and necessarily limited. As Siddahesena (fifth-century Jain thinker) writes, "Since a thing has manifold character, it is comprehended (only) by the omniscient. But a thing becomes the subject matter of a *naya*, when it is conceived from one particular standpoint" [2]. Consider the following gross example: there is a sculpture in the middle of a room. Standing in front of the sculpture gives the viewer one perspective by which they come to know the statue. Standing behind the statue provides another perspective. Both are valid ways to perceive the statue, but both are limited. And, given one's status as non-omniscient, one can't help but approach reality from a limited perspective.

To be sure, different perspectives here are not simply a matter of different opinions or tastes. *Nayavāda* is not used as a way to discuss multiple perspectives on flavors of ice cream or favorite

sports teams. If so, it would become an "agree to disagree" sort of relativism, whereby each person is allowed to have their own opinion and all opinions are valid. Instead, *nayavāda* is more akin to acknowledging different sides of the same coin, in which there is actually a coin and that the coin is (as coins tend to be) non-one-sided (*anekānta*). *Naya* is a valid form of knowing object reality, though always in a particular sense and from a certain point of view. As such, all claims are relative to the perspective from which they are made. To help articulate this relativity, Jainism developed the doctrine of *syādvāda* (the dialectical doctrine of qualified assertion).

Describing a Many-Sided Reality

Syādvāda, as the dialectical corollary of *anekāntavāda*, is essential for talking about a reality that is many-sided and known from a limited perspective. In short, this doctrine of conditional predication insists that assertions be qualified to better represent the complex nature of reality and our limited engagement with it. By predicating a statement with the particle *syāt* (meaning, "from a certain perspective"), the relative truth of the claim can be expressed.

Without such qualification, relatively true claims will be confused for absolute claims, and the many-sided nature of reality will be lost. Consider the above example of the blind men and the elephant. The unqualified assertion, "an elephant is like a tree," is false, insofar as it excludes all contrary claims. As an unqualified assertion, the idea that an elephant is like a tree is incompatible with the notion that an elephant is like a fan, or spear, or wall, or snake, or even rope. But, reality is non-one-sided. As such, an elephant does not possess only one of those characteristics, but all of them! The many-sided nature of reality, whereby an entity (like an elephant) is endowed with infinite characteristics, is not captured by an unqualified assertion. Therefore, to capture the non-one-sided nature of reality, one must qualify all assertions as being conditioned by a certain perspective. In *syādvāda*, an assertion is qualified as to express its being conditioned by one's *naya*, as well as the many-faced nature of reality. Only by following the practice of *syādvāda* can the many-sided nature of complex reality be properly described.

Anekāntavāda as a Corrective

While Jains hold that their doctrines are eternal, and therefore not direct products of historical contexts, one can trace the application of the doctrine of *anekāntavāda* historically. The principles of *anekānta* are clearly present in many Jain scriptures, the most prominent example (discussed above) being the statement from the *Tattvārthasūtra* which says, "Existence is characterized by origination, disappearance (destruction) and permanence" (*Tattvārthasūtra* 5:30). This famous passage is used throughout Jain history as an example of *anekānta*, which overcomes the *ekānta* of both Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism.

According to Jainism, in the spirit of Sankara, the Advaitins identify permanence as the one-sided absolute of reality (Brahman). Buddhists, on the other hand, identify impermanence (origination and disappearance) as the one-sided absolute nature of reality (sunyata). The Jain perspective, however, sees both of these one-sided perspectives of Buddhism and Advaita as only partially true and from limited perspectives. According to the teachings of Jainism and *anekāntavāda*, a full understanding of reality involves both permanence and change, bringing together both parts represented by the Buddhist and Advaitin perspectives together in a synthesized whole. The Jain position is neither identity nor difference, but both identity and difference – or perhaps identity-in-difference.

In this way, *anekāntavāda* is used as a corrective. It corrects one-sided perspectives by uniting them in creative synthesis, to form a more complete truth. It allows the Jain perspective to become a sort of inclusive middle way between two or more extremes, whatever they may be. It accepts the partial and one-sided truths of others as true, though never in an ultimate sense. Naturally, such a synthesis raises questions with respect to the ability to affirm mutually contradictory perspectives into

a rational and intelligible whole. To respond to such concerns, Jainism relies on the logic of *syādvāda* and *nayavāda* to work in conjunction with *anekāntavāda*. In this way, seemingly contradictory notions are synthesized into a rational whole by qualifying previously unqualified assertions and taking into account our limited encounter with multifaceted reality. This is the corrective nature of *anekāntavāda*, turning unqualified exclusive assertions into relatively true descriptions of complex reality.

Intellectual Ahimsa

In recent years, Jain scholars have emphasized the close relationship between *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *anekāntavāda*, suggesting that *anekāntavāda* (along with *syādvāda* and *nayavāda*) is a form of "intellectual *ahimsa*." Historically, this is far from the case, as *anekāntavāda* has been used as a weapon against other rival perspectives in India – establishing the superiority of the Jain perspective. The above discussion of *anekāntavāda* as a corrective to Advaita Vedantin and Buddhist theories of permanence and impermanence is representative of this historical usage of *anekāntavāda*. This does not mean, however, that *anekāntavāda* can only be used to establish the superiority of Jainism over Buddhism, Hinduism, or any other position.

In fact, contemporary Jain scholarship has identified the notion of intellectual *ahimsa* as an important part of contemporary Jain thought. This intellectual nonviolence is rooted in the notion of respecting the views of others. It is suggested that when one rejects the perspectives of others, as is customary when treating relative perspectives as exclusive absolutes, one does violence to the views of others. Therefore, in response to such philosophical violence, intellectual *ahimsa* works as an ethic of philosophical tolerance.

As explained above, when taken seriously, *anekāntavāda* encourages everyone to explore the perspectives of others as real possibilities where truth can be found. If the disparate views of others are not seen as exclusively incompatible, but as diverse parts of the complex whole, then one can respect and appreciate those views different from one's own as being a piece of the truth that one does not possess.

Cross-References

- Ahimsa
- Jainism (Yakṣa)
- *Nayavāda*
- Reality (Jainism)
- Relativity
- *Syādvāda*
- Truth (Jainism)

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