

Pluralism, Perspectivalism and Durability: anekantavada as a dialectic discourse

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Religious Plurality

Religious Pluralism is both a fact of human history as well as a potential threat to cohesive social structures, fidelity in knowledge transmission, coherent meaning production, political consensus, ethical motivation and existential ease. While in many ways laudable, religious pluralism can also be problematically disconcerting. The threat can be met through several strategies, each of which tends towards either the one or the many. This can be understood as a tension between a universal or homogenising (centripetal) force or a pluralising, particularising (centrifugal) force.

As well as the above mentioned threats, there are clear benefits to religious plurality and diversity: the chief being a kind of robustness and its concomitant durability. When religion exists in a number of forms, its benefits (cohesion, personal meaning production, relative moral certitude, clear epistemological boundaries etc.) can similarly take a number of forms. Analogous to species diversity, religious plurality thus creates potential durability and adaptability, helping to ensure the maintenance and spread of the benefits of religion.

Religious traditions thus face a common dilemma: how to balance the competing centrifugal and centripetal forces which arise out of religious plurality.

The Jaina tradition has developed a unique strategy: Anekantavada, or *no one view*.

Anekantavada

Bimal Krishna Matilal describes the Jaina theory of anekāntavāda (or *syādvāda*) as a form of meta-metaphysics. Whereas Advaitins may wish to claim that everything is Brahman, Buddhists that everything is non-soul, impermanent and suffering, the materialist that everything is nothing more than matter in its various forms, idealists that everything is mind, the Jainas claim that everything is 'non-one-sided.' As such the Jaina doctrine encompasses the fundamental philosophical commitments of the others, thus gaining a 'meta-level' perspective - however by this one should not conclude that the Jaina doctrine is thereby more comprehensive nor more correct, since anekāntavāda itself is but one perspective and thus becomes a member of its own set. As a defining characteristic of Jaina thought, however, one can understand anekāntavāda to be the attempt to reconcile contrary positions, that is,

to show that the mutually opposite characterisation of reality by rival philosophers should be reconciled, for, depending upon different points of view, the reality can be discovered to have both natures, being and non-being, permanent and impermanent, general and particular, expressible and inexpressible. (Quoting Guṇaratna Sūri in his commentary of Haribhadra's *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha*)

This is strictly only true when applied to human knowledge since to avoid self referentiality the Jainas did accept that one absolute truth is possible in the comprehension of all possible perspectives which is only possible for those Jinās such as the Mahāvira. Within the deployment of ordinary humans the perspective of anekāntavāda is itself merely one perspective.

Aside from this pacific element in their thought, anekāntavāda is for Jainas a response to the admission that many seriously held beliefs and positions, individually justifiable by common criteria, are nevertheless contradictory. It simply is the case that serious philosophical positions are mutually incompatible. Instead of charting a middle way between opposing commitments, as the Buddha suggested, or rejecting both as ultimately empty as Nāgārjuna was later to argue, the Jainas accept both positions with qualifications. Through anekāntavāda a pluralisation of perspectives is enjoined while at the same time the dogmatic adherence to a single or partial view (*ekānta*) is mitigated.

Anekāntavāda can properly be likened to a kind of perspectivalism. While the notion that one's historical perspective and social location partly determine the kinds of questions one is likely to ask as well as the availability of certain domains of possible answers is hardly a revelation, we should be careful to distinguish this from a crass relativism which suggests that given the necessarily contextualised nature of all of our epistemic commitments and their ensuing truth claims one can conclude that no particular claim is true or that one claim is as good as any other. Such relativism, though perhaps rife in late modern, western, consumerist society is anathema to the Jaina view.

Jaina perspectivalism is closer to what Janet Soskice, drawing upon discussions in the philosophy of science, rightly points out when she argues that the world in which we live is so complex that it will never be able to be comprehended in a single theory. Reality, in this sense, always surpasses our ability to describe it. This is an old insight and Aquinas stated it well, writing, "there is nothing to stop a thing that is objectively more certain by its nature from appearing subjectively less certain to us because of the disability of our minds ... we are like bats, who in the sunshine blink at the most obvious things." All we have are various models, informed by the reality modelled, by which to approach or approximate our object. This does not lead, as noted above, to a pernicious relativism, since the various realities to which our models refer may be unified despite a panoply of models. Complex topics are generally better described by complex descriptions than by simple single views. The doctrine of anekāntavāda begins with this perspectivalism but develops it further in response to various criticisms. This was deftly exemplified by the 8th century Jaina philosopher Haribhadra.

The challenge for Jaina thinkers is to show how a single subject can be predicated by two distinct and contradictory predicates. Let the statement be "X (the subject) is and is not Y". Matilal's example is a simple one – it is raining. Can the state of affairs predicated by 'is raining' be simultaneously predicated 'is not raining?' The Jaina answer is first to introduce the idea of perspective: by some perspectives it would be raining while by others it would not. The sentence 'it is raining' would be true, for instance if and only if it is raining, and false if it is sunny. The statement can thus be true and false depending on the indexicals pertaining to the subject. The statement could also be true if it is raining in the place where the statement is made and false at some other place; and of course the statement would be true at some times and false at other times. Indeed it is always the case that when the conditions pertaining to the subject of a statement are made clear, one can see that only by virtue of those conditions can the statement be properly indicated as true. When the contrary statement is also clarified as to its subject's conditions, its truth can also be seen to be justified. So if one simply collects together the conditions by virtue of which the statement and its contradiction are both true, we arrive at the state wherein a single statement is both true and false.

The point made here is that the particular conditions or perspectives which are in normal discourse hidden, assumed or neglected must be included in the proposition in order for its correct truth value to be determined. At this point the critic may claim that the Jaina doctrine really amounts to a fairly banal insistence that in order for a statement's truth value to be ascertained one must simply stipulate all of the various indexicals pertaining to it, that is, to fully contextualise the proposition such that its truth value becomes eternal (as Quine would put it). This would indeed be a banal result and it would be odd, to say the least, were the Jaina doctrine merely to insist on this. However, as Matilal reminds us, anekāntavāda entails the further claim that it is not in fact possible for a non-omniscient being to stipulate all of the possible indexicals pertaining to a particular state of affairs. All limited humans must refrain from imagining that we have the ability to exhaust the possible states of affairs which may impinge on the truth value of a proposition at hand. Matilal argues that the plethorisation of perspectives inherent in anekāntavāda is thus really **an ethical command to limit our tendency to universalise and generalise**. We must remain open to revision and even rejection of our prejudiced views. In this Haribhadra is echoed by J.S. Mill who championed a fallibilist epistemology which insists that no truth claim arrived at through reference to empirical data is immune from revision or refutation and thus one must maintain with humility the belief that one may be shown to be wrong about any and every truth claim.

One significant obstacle remains, however. In the above analysis the critic might claim that once one has clarified the indexicals pertaining to a subject to whom contrary predicates are applied, when combining them to allow for the subject to be both true and false with respect to a particular predicate, the various indexicals have left us with different subjects. If I say, for instance, that 'X is Y' is both true and false, depending on the various indexicals relating to X in different circumstances, the critic might argue that just those different circumstances render X non-identical to itself. In one set of circumstances the predicate Y is true of X, but in another set of circumstances X cannot really be said to maintain its identity, the circumstances being radically different. In this case Y being false of X makes no difference since we have different Xs.

This strikes at the substance metaphysics of Jainism and is beyond the scope of the present discussion, however a response was developed to this challenge. Whereas traditional western logic is bivalent - its possible states being only True or False - Jaina and Buddhist logic admits four possible states: True, False, Both and Neither. Where Madhyamīkas take the negative (Neither) way, the Jainas accept the positive 'Both' state. This separate non-reducible logical state they call *avaktavya* (inexpressible). Distinguished from apophatic silence, Matilal suggest that the 'inexpressible' logical possibility entails a simultaneous 'yesno' or 'truefalse' which Jainas refer to as *avaktavya*. Furthermore, every proposition expressing ontological content has the state *avaktavya* in addition to its possible truth or falsity. Anekāntavāda thus applies to all well formed phrases justifying the belief that limited human nature cannot claim for itself epistemic certainty as well as buttressing the Jaina pluralist, realist metaphysic.

Dialetheism

The Jaina principle of anekantavada represents a form of dialectic discourse when considered under traditional Aristotelian logical forms. Dialetheism is the view that some statements can be true and false at the same time and in the same way. As I have shown, anekantavada transcends normal perspectivalism through its affirmation of *avaktavya* as a formal predicate for all well formed propositions. Graham Priest argues that dialetheism better reflects the ambiguities and variabilities of human cognition and epistemology. My claim is that dialectic discourses grow out of a response to irreducible pluralism such as found, almost ubiquitously, in human societies across history and geography. Such strategies must be taken into account in any comprehensive theory of religious cognition and evolution.

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