Anekānta, Ahiṃsā and the Question of Pluralism

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Jainism embraces the philosophy of *anekānta* as staunchly as it espouses the righteousness of ahiṃsā. *Anekānta* and ahiṃsā are customarily discussed in terms of how each presupposes the other. The acceptance of the partiality of knowledge is an expression of non-violence; and a commitment to non-violence necessitates a pluralistic outlook. The two are seen essentially as different aspects of the same ethical orientation. But can we treat ahiṃsā as a normative ethical ideal, and accept as morally just the view (and practice) of others who repudiate it? It has been argued that a truly pluralist approach is a logical impossibility--that some criteria of truth is essential to all worldviews. Pluralism, therefore, *becomes either a form of moral relativism, or another form of* religious exclusivism.[1] In this paper, I suggest the possibility that *anekānta* is a way out of this epistemological quagmire, and that a genuine pluralist view is possible without lapsing into extreme moral relativism or exclusivity.

An Experiment with Jain Pluralism

As I entered the western gates of the Jain Vishva Bharati Institute (JVBI), the spiritual base of the Terāpanthī Jains in India, there was a large sign post indicating the rules of conduct that must be observed while in the JVBI. Although these rules include

[1] Gavin D' Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies*, 32 (June 1996): 223-232, quote from pp. 225-26.

matters of decorum (e.g., proper attire, no smoking), they are essentially guidelines for ahiṃsā. For instance, the consumption of meat and alcohol are strictly forbidden. These are not timid recommendations; they are unapologetic and uncompromising edicts rooted in a bold moral charter that upholds nonviolence as the highest ideal. And yet, despite this unambiguous ethical stance, I was immediately struck by the recognition given to other paths: placards with words of wisdom from other, non-Jain traditions are prominently displayed throughout the JVBI. For instance, next to the guest house where I stayed was a placard with a saying attributed to Jesus, emphasising the importance of humility in the context of charity. It read: "the left hand should not know what the right hand has given."

Can one be a strong defender of one's own beliefs and also accept as true other-ways-of-being, especially those that may be diametrically opposed? Critics of pluralism argue that such a thing is a logical impossibility; that to be consistently relativistic about knowledge claims would require one to be a relativist about one's relativism, which rapidly leads to an epistemological dead end. Because of this, critics assert, whether or not we want to accept it, we are all essentially exclusivists; we cannot help but judge others by some criteria arising from our own worldview. [2]

The Jain doctrine of *anekānta* may, however, offer an alternative. It grants that epistemological neutrality is an impossibility for ordinary humans, but the doctrine does not require it. *Anekānta* does not predicate its pluralism on epistemological neutrality. Instead, it asserts that the holding of even an uncompromising position on truth (as Mahāvīra did with respect to nonviolence) *can* coexist with a celebration of conceptual, philosophical and moral diversity.

The Raising of Lazarus: the Fall of Anekānta?

Soon after I arrived at the JVBI, for what would be a year's sojourn, Gaṇādhipati Gurudeva Tulsī (the ninth ācārya of the

[2] See G. D'Costa, The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *op. cit.*; and Nicholas Rescher, *Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Terāpanthī order) assigned me the job of "Teacher of Christianity" for the *samaṇīs* (nuns). He explained that the nuns pursue studies in other branches of Indian philosophy at the JVBI, but that they know little of non-Indian faiths. He considered it important that they take this opportunity to learn. And so began our experiment with *anekāntavāda.*

A small group of *samaṇīs* and I began to meet thrice a week for our lesson. The first few weeks went smoothly. I talked about those things I knew best, focusing on Jewish and Christian history. The nuns were excellent students, eager to learn and curious about events with which they had little knowledge. I enjoyed our inter-religious dialogues and putting into practice the principles and pleasures of *anekānta.*

But soon the nuns grew weary of the focus on historical detail. Familiar with the narratives form of religious learning, they wanted to hear moral stories about the life and teachings of Jesus. It was here that I eventually came up against, what seemed at the time, intransigent hurdles to a pluralistic approach.

My repertoire of New Testament stories was sketchy. However, I selected those stories that I thought best resonated with the Jain vision of things: I told them about how Jesus helped the poor, the destitute, the outcasts. I recounted the time when he chided his community for condemning a prostitute, declaring that "only he who has not sinned should cast the first stone." I interpreted this narrative as a lesson in human frailty and humility; as a message about seeing all human beings as equal in the eyes of God. The nuns liked the story, and recounted parallel incidences of courage in the life of their leader. They explained that when he, too, challenged many social conventions, he likewise encountered resistance because of his radically egalitarian beliefs.

I continued with the story of Jesus' forty-day fast in the desert. This was a fortuitous choice. Even before I could suggest an interpretation, the nuns had formulated their own. "*Tapas*" (austerities), they said assuredly. While it was not quite the way a priest would explain it to his congregation, Jesus could also be

considered an ascetic in that he had few possessions and was celibate. I felt a sense of accomplishment. My 'students' were learning stories of another tradition that were meaningful to them.

My success, however, was short-lived. The nuns had heard bits and pieces of other stories and wanted to know their religious significance. In particular, two stories puzzled them: Of what religious significance were the stories of turning water into wine, and of raising a man from the dead? I considered these to be good questions. But other than the most obvious point of telling them that Jesus was special, that he was able to perform miracles, did the stories have spiritual significance?

"Well, let's start with the story of Lazarus," I said, "Lazarus was a beloved friend of Jesus who fell ill once when Jesus was away from his village. A message was sent for Jesus to return, but he received it too late. By the time he returned to the village, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Everyone in the village was distraught. Jesus went to the cave where Lazarus was buried, and called upon him to come out. To everyone's astonishment, he emerged! Jesus had raised him from the dead."

> "But why? Why did Jesus bring him back to life?" a samaṇī asked.
>
> "Jesus wanted to help the family that was suffering." I answered.
>
> "But everyone loses someone to death; why help *this* family," the samaṇī duly persisted.
>
> I had no profound answer for the nuns; but maintained my teacherly stance: "I believe he tried to help whoever was in need. This was a very tragic situation, and because he was able to help, he did."
>
> "But we all must die. This man, Lazarus, too must die, yes? So why help in a *physical* way? Why not help his soul? Or help his family to understand death?"

I had no answer. This had always struck me as an odd miracle, and I could not expound on its theological import.

> "And the *wine* story?" another samaṇī asked, hoping I might better explain this one.

> "Just as in the story of Lazarus, the most significant thing about the story is that it reveals Jesus to be unlike other men," I waffled, "He was able to perform miracles. The fact that he could do these miraculous things is evidence, for Christians, of his divine status..."
> "But if he was god, *why* would he do *that* miracle? Why not something more important?" one of the samaṇīs asked.
> "And why just for one wedding party?" asked another.

I knew immediately that I was on less than solid ground when I tried to explain that alcohol was not prohibited, irreligious or *hiṃsā* from within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In fact, wine plays a significant role on special occasions in both Jewish and Christian celebrations. Then, when I added my own Epicurean interpretation of the significance of a blissful life, I had all but lost my audience. From a Jain point of view, the miraculously supplying of intoxicating beverages for a wedding party hardly seemed a pious narrative worthy of passing down from one generation to another for nearly two thousand years. In fact, the more we talked about it, the more ridiculous it appeared, and eventually we succumbed to a fit of laughter.

Rather than being an instrument for the glorification of *anekāntavāda*, I felt I was helping to undermine it. Rather than convincing the nuns that Christianity had a corner on truth (just like Jainism), I felt I was setting it up as an example of *mithyādarśana*, a deluded view of reality. I sat back, half bemused, and half frustrated with my inability to evoke some appreciation of the teachings of Christianity. It was not as though I expected the nuns to be rapturous over the Biblical stories, but I knew I was not doing the tradition justice. These stories meant so much to so many people; why was I so poor an emissary? I regrouped my thoughts and took a third stab at it.

"If you think about it," I began, "these are really stories about compassion and universal friendliness (*karuṇā* and *maitrī*). This is the Golden Rule – to treat others as you would have them treat you." I continued, "Imagine the power of his actions – that a

person capable of such greatness would concern himself with our mundane needs proves his boundless compassion."

The nuns considered my words. They were not greatly impressed with the explanation. But it was one that at least made sense to them. A form of compassion and friendship that focused on the material well being appeared very crude and not very inspiring. They reckoned, however, that perhaps this 'blunt' compassion was what was most suitable for those on the low rungs of the *guṇasthāna* (stages of spiritual progress) "Perhaps this was all the people could understand," one samani proposed. Another agreed by adding, "Later the people could be taught that true compassion is concerned with the soul, not the body." I was uneasy with their rendition, but felt that I did not have the tools or ability to convey an alternate, more 'profound' interpretation.

The Limits of Pluralism

Back in my room that evening, with time to reflect, I became doubtful about the promise of pluralism. Had not today's exchange revealed its weakness? Rather than truly engage in a suspension of criticism, and an appreciation of the "other" on its own terms, we had sought to translate Christianity into a Jain idiom. I had attempted to tailor Christianity to fit what I believed was my audience's worldview, and the nuns accepted as significant only those aspects that did not deviate from their already held beliefs.

But could it be otherwise? Not according to Gavin D'Costa who argued that the idea of pluralism is misconceived and that, in essence, it is nothing more than a form of exclusivism. He wrote:

> [T]here is no such thing as pluralism because pluralists are committed to holding some form of truth criteria and by virtue of this, anything that falls foul of such criteria is excluded from counting as truth (in doctrine and in practice). Thus, pluralism operates within the same logical structure of exclusivism and in this respect pluralism can never really affirm the genuine autonomous value of religious pluralism for, like exclusivism, it can only do so by tradition specific criteria for truth.[3]

[3] G. D' Costa, The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *op. cit.*, p. 226.

It is interesting to note that the philosopher Nicholas Rescher and the anthropologist Richard Shweder anticipated many of D'Costa's critiques of pluralism. They argued, from their respective disciplines, that our celebrations of conceptual diversity fall short of true pluralism; that although most of us pay lip service to the idea of pluralism, we refuse to accept its logical outcome. The pluralist platform states the following.[4]

1. We the members of our group (religious or otherwise) are rationally justified in our conception of things.
2. They, the members of some other group, have a different conception of things.
3. They, the members of that other group, are rationally justified in their conception of things.

And yet these points, inevitability, lead to a fourth and final proposition – a proposition that most people repudiate:

4. If others are rationally justified in their conception of things and that their conception is different from ours, then we cannot be rationally justified in our conception of things, and vice versa.

An unwillingness to entertain this fourth proposition, however, results in the incoherence of the entire platform. As a result of this, critics of pluralism assert that pluralists give an account of the 'other' against a backdrop of their own worldview – every bit as much as do exclusivists. If we accept that, epistemologically, pluralism is a no-man's-land, we are left – it would seem – with few options: either we must 'grow up' as some critics would have, and acknowledge our inherently exclusivist ways-of-knowing (i.e., accept that we cannot avoid imposing our own standards on others) or retreat to a position of philosophical and moral subjectivism, which claims the source of truth to reside within the individual subject alone.

Contemporary society is characterised by these opposing positions--we are simultaneously plagued by intolerance and

[4] This platform is paraphrased from R. Shweder, *Thinking Through Cultures*. (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press,1991). p. See also Nicholas Rescher, *Rationality, op. cit.*

ethnocentric smugness, and weakened by radical subjectivism and moral relativism. Ironically, the latter (moral relativism) is commonly seen as the progressive response to the former (ethnocentrism). In rejecting the view that all peoples should be judged by a single standard, many leap to the conclusion that standards, as such, do not exist at all. However, locating the criteria for truth within the thinking subject alone denies the social basis of knowledge as much as it denies the possibility of a transcendent reality. The Jain doctrine of *anekānta* suggests another possibility.

Anekāntavāda: A Way Out?

So basic is *anekānta* considered to be to a non-violent way-of-knowing, that it is considered an intrinsic element of the ethic of *ahiṃsā*. Mahāvīra is attributed as saying:

> "Those who praise their own faiths and ideologies and blame that of their opponents and thus distort the truth will remain confined to the cycle of birth and death."[5]

Anekāntavāda asserts that no viewpoint is to be taken as the final, definitive viewpoint because reality itself (and not just our human perception of it) is many-sided. Herein lies its strength and its divergence from other pluralist positions, which tend to focus on epistemology alone. Although *anekāntavāda* does have an epistemological component – especially in its related principle of "*syādvāda*" ("doctrine of maybe"), which states that truth is predicated on one's condition or context, its support of pluralism is bolstered by its metaphysical contention that reality itself is not singular.

Padmanabh Jaini explains, "In its wholeness, any reality is the co-existence of contradictory elements, such as eternity and transience, or unity and multiplicity."[6] Different ways-of-being

[5] This quote from Mahavira comes from the Sutrakṛtānga, 1.1.2.23. as quoted in J.B. Trapnell, "Indian Sources of a Pluralist View of Religions." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (35:2, Spring 1998), p. 219.

[6] P.S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) p. 91.

and of knowing are understood as "*nayas*", that is, as logically distinct viewpoints, each coherent and true to its context, but ultimately partial.

Jainism, thus, recognises that no one tradition has a monopoly on truth and that, in fact, other *nayas* should be explored in the search for truth. This is a different expression of pluralism than the one typically encountered (and critiqued). The standard pluralist position claims that various religious phenomena are culturally conditioned diverse responses to the Transcendent. The Transcendent is singular, but manifests itself (or is differently constructed) according to different cultural traditions. Therefore, the aim of pluralism and relativism is to give permission to diversity and difference; to see in others diverse signs of our 'divinity'. *Anekāntavāda* goes beyond this. It does not merely give 'permission' to diversity; it (ideally) mandates an encounter with it. It is only through exposure to other ways of being, will a fuller picture of reality emerge.

> All the nayas, therefore, in their exclusively individual standpoints are absolutely faulty. If, however, they consider themselves as supplementary to each other, they are right in their viewpoints...[I]f all the nayas arrange themselves in a proper way and supplement each other, then alone they are worthy of being termed as "the whole truth" or the right view in its entirety.[7]

A re-visioning of our view of reality as *not* "one sided" might allow us to accept the four propositions of a pluralist platform, enumerated above. Unlike eliminative or nihilistic strains of relativism that assert there is no reality beyond appearances, *anekāntavāda* accepts an existent reality. Yet accepting the existence of reality does not mean it can be understood singularly; reality is understood to be 'many sided' and thus reveals itself in manifold ways simultaneously. Therefore, in opposition to both the 'equivocal pluralists' and the critics of pluralism, *anekāntavāda* does allow us to affirm the

[7]Quoted from Siddhasena Divākara's *Sanmati Tarka* as cited in J.B. Trapnell, "Indian Sources of a Pluralist View of Religions," *op. cit.*, p. 220.

fourth proposition of the pluralist platform, namely that "If others are rationally justified in their conception of things and that conception is different from ours, *we too can be* rationally justified in our conception of things, and vice versa." If reality is accepted as manifold, this is no longer illogical.

Anekāntavāda can, perhaps, help redress the epistemological muddle in which we post-moderns find ourselves. The fact that there is no singular uniform standard of truth does not mean there are no standards or no truths; because there is not a single uniform reality, does not mean that reality does not exist.

Lazarus Revisited: Conclusion

Putting the doctrine of *anekānta* into practice is a huge challenge. And in hindsight, I believe that my stumblings in Ladnun were not so much evidence of failure, as they were evidence of this challenge. I had made the pluralists' mistake of believing openness to the other required a break from one's own beliefs – a temporary suspension in epistemological limbo. This view is futile and full of inconsistencies. But Jain pluralism does not require it and therefore the possibility for a honest and creative acceptance of diversity can exist.

The Jain nuns of Ladnun uncompromisingly maintained ahiṃsā to be an eternal and unchangeable moral law. Other views or practices that would contradict these beliefs would certainly be challenged, and ultimately rejected. But what is significant, I believe, is that both the retention and rejection of views is tempered by the belief that our perception conveys only a partial reality, that reality itself is manifold, and that to assume that one particular point of view is final is to hold a limited picture of reality.

The doctrine of many-sidedness comes close to obligating its adherents to become familiar with other ways-of-knowing. My appointment in Ladnun as "Teacher of Christianity" is a testament to that. And, in so doing, it goes a long way towards accomplishing the goal at the very core of pluralism, that is, recognition of autonomy and legitimacy of diversity of human existence.