Why is Anekāntavāda Important?

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As the events of September 11, 2001 so tragically attest, we live at a time in global history when violence threatens to destroy all life on our planet. If we are to prevent violence from destroying ourselves and our whole world, it is imperative that we seek nonviolent solutions to our problems. From a Jain perspective, the threat to life that we face arises from a faulty epistemology and metaphysics as much as from faulty ethics. The moral failure to respect the life of others, including life forms other than human, is rooted in dogmatic but mistaken knowledge claims that fail to recognize other legitimate perspectives. Such one-sided perspectives result in destructive actions and violent behaviors. Because existence itself is complex, subtle and many-sided, unless the knowledge on which our actions are based reflects this many-sidedness of reality it will produce actions that are destructive of existence. As Umāsvāti noted, "A person with a deluded world-view is like an insane person who follows arbitrary whims and cannot distinguish true from false."[1]

The most important underlying philosophical question about preventing violence, according to Jainism is, how are we to avoid the destructive violence that results from courses of action based on one-sided ideological dogmatism? The ideological dogmatism underlying violence is grounded in knowledge claims that,

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[1] Umāsvāti, *Tattvārtha Sūtra,* 1.33. See Nathmal Tatia (ed. & trans.), *That Which Is* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 23.

though limited and only partially true, are mistaken for absolute truth. Therefore, to avoid violence, one key step is to find an alternative theory of knowledge, an epistemology, that can support dialogue and negotiation among people of diverse perspectives and claims. Such an epistemology, that includes the truths of multiple perspectives, is made possible by the Jain philosophy of *anekāntavāda* (non-absolutism).[2]

Recognizing that everything can be known from variety of perspectives leads naturally to a more balanced and less dogmatic understanding of reality. This understanding encompasses the insight that other beings are not 'other' to themselves; that they are themselves just as much as we are ourselves. It is this insight that enables us to see the 'other' on its own terms, from its own side, rather than as merely the 'other' that is opposed to us. And this ability to see the other person as no longer the 'other,' but as identical to our own self, underlies the capacity for empathy and sympathy with the other that operationalizes *ahiṃsā*. Because one-sided, fanatical views, especially when joined to political ideologies, lead to terrible violence, commitment to *ahiṃsa* requires epistemological respect for all points of view. This respect, based on the *anekāntika* nature of reality itself, allows dialogue and reconciliation in the quest for truth, a quest that makes it possible for holders of false views to see for themselves the falsity of their views. Perhaps, this is why Umāsvāti introduces his classic work explaining Jain philosophy with the words: "The enlightened world-view, enlightened knowledge, and enlightened conduct are the path to liberation."[3]

Because enlightened conduct is the way of nonviolence or ahiṃsā and because the latter is implied by *anekāntavāda*, it is

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[2] For a fuller discussion of ecological applications of Jain metaphysical and epistemological view, see John M. Koller, "Jain Ecological Perspectives," in Christopher Key Chapple (ed.), *Jainism and Ecology: Nonviolence in the Web of life*, (Cambrdige, MA.: Harvard university press, 2002) pp. 19-34.

[3] Umāsvāti, *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, 1.1, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

important to first discuss briefly the principle of *ahiṃsā*. The term *ahiṃsā* is negative, but the principle is entirely positive. *Ahiṃsā* embodies the realization that all life belongs to the same global family and that to hurt others is to destroy the community of life, the basis of all sacredness. Thus, *ahiṃsā* requires not only that we avoid hurting other living beings, but that we must endeavor to help each other.[4] Indeed, Umāsvāti defines the purpose of life-forms as helping each other: "Souls exist to provide service to each other."[5]

Jainism embraces a very strict and far-reaching concept of *ahiṃsā*. Unlike others who claim that unless a person intended the violence which follows an act the person is not guilty of performing a violent act, the Jains claim that if an act produces violence, then that person is guilty of committing a violent act even if the violence was not intended. For example, if a monk unknowingly offers poisoned food to his brethren and they die from the poisoned food, in the Jain view the monk would be guilty of performing a violent act, but in the Buddhist view the monk would not be guilty. The crucial difference between the two views is that the Buddhist view excuses the act, categorizing it as non-intentional because the monk did not know that the food was poisoned, whereas the Jain view regards the act as intentional because the monk is responsible for his ignorance, and, therefore, for any act that follows from this ignorance. Thus, according to Jainism the moral imperative to practice *ahiṃsā* includes the requirement to remove the ignorance that prevents a person from seeing the violence embodied in his or her actions.

From a metaphysical perspective, Jainism can be viewed as transforming the principle of *ahiṃsā* embodied in the respect for the life of others, into epistemological respect for the views of

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[4] See John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), pp. 39—40. For a fuller discussion of the Jain view of life see also John M. Koller, *The Indian Way* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 108-132.

[5] Umāsvāti, *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, 5.21. *op. cit.*, p. 131.

others, thereby establishing a basis for reconciling conflicting ideological claims. To see what "epistemological respect for the views of others" means we must first understand that *anekāntavāda* is essentially an ontological principle. It was developed to maintain the Jain view that substance--jīva(soul) and ajīva(matter)--are both eternal and changing.[6] As a principle of non-dogmatism, *anekāntavāda* rejects both the view that existence is only inherently enduring, and the view that it is only constantly changing, because each of these views is *ekāntika* or one-sided, and, therefore, only partially true. However, *anekāntavāda* respects the partial truth in each view, and recognizes that when seen as partial truths, these views can be combined so that the point of view from which each is true is preserved.

"Epistemological respect for the views of others," however, is not relativism.[7] It does not mean conceding that all arguments and all views are equal. It means that logic and evidence determine which views are true in what respect and to what extent. It does not mean that Jain thinkers who were committed to the truth of the Jain view could not, as scholars, be committed to explaining and defending their view by means of argument. In fact, it allows Jain thinkers to maintain the correctness of their own view, to recognize the inferiority of other views, and to criticize both their own views and other views in terms of their weaknesses, but to do so respectfully, recognizing their partial correctness. This is a middle way between absolutism and relativism, allowing Jain thinkers, in the words of Christopher Chapple, to maintain an "outlook toward the ideas of others [that] combines tolerance with a certainty in and commitment to

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[6] This can be shown, at least in part, by tracing the development of *anekāntavāda* out of the earlier method of analysis and resolution called *vibhājyavāda*, as I have done in a forthcoming paper entitled "*Avyakata* and *Vibhājya* in Early Buddhism and Jainism." Forthcoming in the Lund University Conference Volume on "Early Buddhism and Jainism."

[7] See Jayendra Soni, "Philosophical Significance of the Jaina Theory of Manifoldness," in *Studien Zu Interkulturellen Philosophie* , Vol. 7, p. 285.

Jaina cosmological and ethical views."[8] For example, Haribhadra showed "remarkable willingness to evaluate rival intellectual systems on the basis of their logical coherence alone."[9]

How is epistemological respect for the views of other is established in Jainism? Most fundamentally it is through the use of the epistemological theory of viewpoints (*nayavāda*) and the sevenfold scheme *(saptabhangī)* of qualified predication (*syādvāda*). *Nayavāda* recognizes that ordinary, non-omniscient, knowledge claims are always limited by the particular standpoint on which they are based. Consequently, claims from one perspective must always be balanced and complemented by claims from other perspectives. *Syādvāda* recognizes that all knowledge claims need to be qualified in various ways because of the many-sidedness of reality and the limitations of any given standpoints of knowledge.

Let us first turn to the following questions: What are the *nayas*? How do they contribute to the reconciliation of opposing viewpoints in the search for truth? The *nayas* or standpoints may be thought of as different points of view taken by someone searching for the truth. According to Akalaṅka, in the *Sanmati Tarka*, the standpoints are the presuppositions of inquirers, embodying the points of view from which they are investigating the thing in question.[10] In ordinary cognition, as opposed to omniscient cognition, the knower necessarily sees the thing from a particular point of view. Consequently, the nature of the thing that is revealed to him is necessarily conditioned and limited by this particular point of view, enabling him to have only partial, incomplete knowledge of it. As Siddhasena says: "Since a thing has manifold character, it is [fully] comprehended [only] by the

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[8] Christopher Key Chapple. *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 85.

[9] Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 196.

[10] Akalaṅka, *Sanmati Tarka*, 3.47. Edited by S. Sanhhavi and B Doshi. Ahmedabad: Gujarat Paratattva Mandira Granthavali, 1924-31.

omniscient. But a thing becomes the subject matter of a *naya*, when it is conceived from one particular standpoint."[11] Thus, the *nayas* serve to categorize the different points of view from which reality might be investigated. *Nayavāda* also encourages investigators to assume other perspectives, including the important perspective of the other as a persisting, but constantly changing, entity entitled to the same respect for life and happiness as oneself. For example, when one assumes the perspectives of other life-forms, such as animals or plants, it is possible to see and feel their connectedness to us and to feel their suffering when they are injured. Knowing how much like us they are and knowing that they are as dependent on their environment as we are, we have incentive to not injure them and to not destroy them or their environment.

With regard to the number and character of standpoints from which something may be investigated, it is generally agreed that although theoretically there are an unlimited number of them, two opposing standpoints are fundamental. On the one hand, things can be viewed in terms of their substantial being, emphasizing their self-identity, permanence and essential nature. This standpoint regards *sameness* as fundamental. As an extreme view, it is exemplified by the *Advaita* teaching that Brahman alone is truly real. On the other hand, things can be viewed in terms of process, emphasizing the changes that they undergo. This standpoint emphasizes *difference*. In its extreme form it is exemplified by the Buddhist teaching of interdependent co-arising (*pratitya samutpāda)* as the nature of existence, a teaching that insists that everything is selfless (*anātman*) and impermanent (*anitya*).

When the differences within each of the two fundamental standpoints of sameness and difference are taken into account we get the standard set of seven standpoints, namely: the ordinary, or undifferentiated; the general; the practical; the clearly manifest; the verbal; the subtle; and the "thus-happened." The first three,

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11 Siddhasena, *Nyayavatara*, 29. Edited by A.N. Upadhye. Bombay: Jaina Sahitya Vikas Mandal, 1971.

the undifferentiated, the general, and the practical, are standpoints from which to investigate the thing itself, as a substance, whereas the remaining four are standpoints from which to investigate the modifications that things undergo.[12]

Thus, we see that each *naya* or standpoint allows the investigator only a partial and, therefore, limited view of the object in question. The principal value of recognizing that a *naya* affords only a partial view of the object is that it enables one to distinguish between the limited view that results from a *naya* and the genuine knowledge that a valid means of knowledge, a *pramāṇa*, provides. This distinction, in turn, makes it possible to recognize when knowledge claims are excessive or one-sided (*ekāntika*) because they confuse a *naya* with a *praṃāna*. As one perceives the object from a combination of standpoints one comes closer to seeing the object as it really is. But only by seeing it from all standpoints would one actually attain the kind of valid cognition that *pramāṇas* alone can provide.

Let us now turn to the question, What is meant by *Syādvāda*? *Syādvāda* is so named because it embodies a theory about how the logical operator "*syāt*" is used in all the seven varieties of a particular predication. To understand the philosophical use of *syāt* we must distinguish between its ordinary use and its logical function in Jain epistemology. In ordinary Sanskrit, "*syāt*" is often used to mean "maybe," as an alternative lying between "yes" or "no," both of which are rejected as an appropriate answer to a question. Thus, in its ordinary usage, "*syāt*" transforms a categorical statement into a conditional statement. But the Jains used this particle in a very special epistemological sense to indicate the many-sided nature of a proposition. The uniqueness of the Jain approach to an epistemological middle way lies in its use of the "*syāt*" particle in predication. Indeed, this uniqueness is why the seven-fold

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[12] For a detailed discussion of the seven *nayas*, see John M. Koller, "*Syādvada* as the Epistemological Key to the Jaina Middle Way Metaphysics of *Anekāntavāda*," in *Philosophy East and West* (Volume 50, Number 3, July 2000):400-407, pp. 401-403.

predication is called *syādvāda*. Its epistemological use transforms an unqualified categorical statement not into a conditional statement, but into a qualified categorical statement. Thus, "*syāt*" encapsulates the appropriate conditions that qualify a given statement, enabling the categorical statement thus qualified to have a truth value determined in accord with its correspondence with what is actually the case.

Since becoming is the negation, the "is-not" of being, and since being is the negation, the "is-not" of becoming, Jain logic insisted on the middle ground between the extremes of "is" and "is not" in order to predicate both being and becoming of the same existent. Maintaining this middle ground led to the Jain development of *syādvāda*, a theory of predication that recognizes not only the predicates "is," and "is not," but also the predicate "inexpressible," a predicate that combines "is" and "is not."

Combining the theory of standpoints or *nayas* with the above three predicates leads to the famous seven-fold template for expressing important claims. These seven forms of predication as qualified by the expression "*syāt*" are also referred to as the *saptabhangi*, explicitly identifying *syādvāda* with the seven-fold formula of qualified predication. Although Umāsvāti and other early thinkers do not refer to this point, the later Jain philosophers agreed that all important philosophical statements should be expressed in this seven-fold way in order to remove the danger of dogmatism (*ekāntavāda*) in philosophy.

Of the seven-fold predication, we see that the four basic forms of predication are those of affirmation, denial, joint but successive affirmation and denial, and joint and simultaneous affirmation and denial. The third form of predication allows statements about things that change, for before something arises it does not exist, but after it has arisen it does exist, and after it has decayed it will again not exist. But this third form is not really a unique form of predication, for it merely first predicates "is," and then, later, predicates "is not," thus simply successively affirming and denying the same predicate. The fourth form of predication is called "inexpressible," because there is no way that language can

adequately express simultaneous affirmation and negation. But because the fourth form is neither affirmation nor denial it constitutes a distinctly third kind of predicate, different from either affirmation or denial.

From these three primary predicates, affirmation, denial and inexpressible, the seven-fold formula of predication is easily reached by using each of these three predicates units either by itself, or in combination with one of the others, or in combination with both of the others.[13] Taking the example of a pot the seven kinds of predication may be applied as follows:

1. Seen under certain conditions, the pot exists.
2. Seen under certain conditions, the pot does not exist.
3. Seen under certain conditions, the pot exists but seen under certain (other) conditions, the pot does not exist.
4. Seen under certain conditions, the pot is inexpressible.
5. Seen under certain conditions, the pot both exists and is inexpressible.
6. Seen under certain conditions, the pot both does not exist and is inexpressible.
7. Seen under certain conditions, the pot exists, does not exist, and is also inexpressible.

As we have noted, the first two kinds of predication in the above formula, affirmation and denial, are unproblematic conditions of being able to describe things in ways that differentiate between them. The third kind, successive affirmation and denial, enables us to explain change in the sense of attributing contrary predicates, such as arising and decay to the same thing but at successive times.

The fourth kind of predication, the inexpressible, is both more problematic, and from the Jain perspective, more important. It is intended to reconcile what might appear to be exclusive, or contradictory, opposites, but which are, from the Jain perspective, merely partial, one-sided statements that from a higher perspective are actually complementary. For example, the

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[13] For a detailed discussion of the seven-fold predication, see Koller, "*Syādvāda* as the Epistemo-logical Key to the Jaina Middle Way," *op. cit.*, pp. 403-406.

Advaitins deny the reality of change, giving it merely the status of *māyā*, while affirming only the reality of the unchanging Brāhman/Ātman. On the other hand, the Buddhists deny the reality of the unchanging, declaring the unreality of Ātman (*anātman*) and affirms only the changing as real. From the Jain perspective, if there were no unchanging substance to undergo the modifications that involve arising, endurance, and decay, there could be no change. But since we experience change it cannot be denied that substances actually undergo change. Thus, in some way, both the Buddhists and the Advaitins must be right. Within the Advaitin's conceptual scheme, however, the Buddhists cannot be right because their contradictory claims are excluded by the claimed truth of the unchanging as the real. Similarly, from within the Buddhist conceptual scheme, the Advaitins cannot be right for their contradictory claims are excluded by the claimed truth of the changing as the real. Indeed, if taken at the same level and from the same perspective, even the Jains would see the Advaitin and Buddhist claims as contradictory and mutually exclusive. However, from the perspective of a higher, inclusive, level made possible by the ontology and epistemology of *anekāntavāda* and *syādvāda*, their claims can be seen as *ekāntika*, or partially true, and therefore not mutually exclusive contradictory claims.

In conclusion, *Nayavāda* supports the metaphysical doctrine of *anekāntavāda* as a way of thinking about existence as simultaneously both being and becoming. It demonstrates how opposing views are one-sided and limited because they are based on only one, or a limited number of, standpoints. In this way the use of nayas help us in avoiding the one-sided errors of identifying existence with either the permanence and sameness of being on the one hand, or with the ever-changing process of becoming on the other. *Syādvāda* grounds and supports *anekāntavāda* in the sense that it explains how a statement about something that is permanent, remaining identical with itself over time, and that is simultaneously impermanent, becoming something else, can be true. *Syādvāda* is essentially a theory of predication

Thus, relying on the principles of *nayavāda* and *syādvāda, anekāntavāda* has the great potential to eliminate violent argument between ideological opponents by methodically both disarming and persuading them. Here we see the importance of *anekāntavāda* in fostering a sense of nonviolence or attempting to reduce violence. It is neither a thesis about skepticism or uncertainty nor a formulation of probability, but a thesis about non-exclusive predication based on the recognition that a given thing includes a potentially unlimited number of characteristics. It is, thus, a method of reconciling opposites, and making it attractive for persons holding opposing views to enter into dialogue and negotiate their differences, thus avoiding violent confrontation.