

Anekāntavāda and Ahimsā

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Introduction

What is the relationship between *anekāntavāda* (or as it is more widely known in Hindi, *anekāntvād*) and *ahimsā*? It has become commonplace in contemporary Jain discourse to connect these two concepts quite closely, as elements woven seamlessly together as parts of an organic whole—the internally coherent, logical system of thought and practice that is known as Jainism, or Jain Dharma. I recently suggested to some Jain laypersons that the relationship of *anekāntavāda* to *ahimsā* is the relationship between theory and practice—to be more specific, that *anekāntavāda* is the abstract theory or philosophy of which *ahimsā* is the practical embodiment, and that *ahimsā* is the practice of *anekāntavāda*—a suggestion which was met with strong approval by my Jain conversation partners.

This way of conceptualizing the relationship between *anekāntavāda* and *ahimsā* is not, however, typical of the way these two ideas have been understood by thinkers in the Jain tradition historically. On the contrary, as John Cort has argued persuasively, in an article titled “‘Intellectual Ahimsā’ Revisited: Jain Tolerance and Intolerance of Others,” published in the July 2000 issue of *Philosophy East and West*, the explicit connection of *anekāntavāda* to *ahimsā* is a relatively new insight in the Jain community. Cort traces the first occurrence of this explicit connection to A.B. Dhruva’s introduction to Malliṣeṇa’s *Syādvādamañji*, published in 1933. (The *Syādvādamañjari* is, of course, centuries older. The 1933 date refers to Dhruva’s introduction to a particular printing of the text.)

Does Cort’s observation invalidate the contemporary Jain understanding of these two concepts as being inextricably interwoven as components in an internally consistent system? My thesis today is that it does not. Like all traditions, so long as Jainism refers to the worldview and practice of a living community, its concepts and practices are quite capable of being reinterpreted and re-applied by each new generation of its adherents in

ways appropriate to their changing circumstances and understandings. Cort's observation does, however, obligate any of us who would utilize concepts such as *anekāntavāda* and *ahiṃsā* responsibly to be attentive to the rich intellectual history from which these ideas have emerged, and to deploy them in a way that is informed by this rich tradition, rather than reducing them to a mere "feel-good" philosophy.

In my presentation today, my intent, or *saṃkalpa*, is to sketch, briefly, the history of the relationship between *anekāntavāda* and *ahiṃsā*—including the independence of the two concepts, as outlined by Cort—and then conclude by showing how these two might be brought together constructively by contemporary Jains, as well as by other scholars, like myself, who wish to draw upon these concepts for constructive purposes, in keeping with the spirit and intent of contemporary Jainism.

Origins and Histories of Anekāntavāda and Ahiṃsā

Though the term *anekāntavāda* does not appear in Jain texts until what is widely regarded as the classical period of Jain philosophy—and indeed of Indian philosophy more generally—roughly the middle of the first millennium of the Common Era, the method that is associated with this teaching can be traced to the earliest extant Jain literature—that is, the *Āgama*, or scriptural literature of the Śvetāmbara Jain community. The philosophical method, or dialectical strategy, to which I am referring eventually becomes formalized as *syādvāda*, the doctrine of conditional predication, in classical Jain writings like the fifth century CE *Āptamīmāṃsā* of Samantabhadra. This method consists, at its most basic, of the specification of the various senses in which truth claims are both true and false, their truth and falsehood being dependent upon the perspective from which they are made. In the *Āgamas*, Mahāvīra is presented as deploying this method in a manner very much like the *vibhajya* method of the Buddha: that is, further analyzing certain important questions regarded as "unanswerable" (or *avyākata*) into more basic component questions. Thus, whether or not the world is eternal depends upon if, by "world," one is inquiring about the totality of existence or about the current cosmic cycle. If the former is one's object of

inquiry, then the answer to the question is “Yes,” for something has always existed. But if one is inquiring about the latter, then the answer is “No,” for all cosmic cycles have a definite beginning and ending. The answer to the ambiguous unanalyzed question “Is the world eternal?” is both “Yes” and “No.” Similarly with the question “Are living beings immortal?” the answer depends upon whether one is referring to the souls (*jīva*) of the living beings in question, which are immortal, or to their current embodied state, which is of course temporary. We can see that Mahāvīra’s method serves to disambiguate these ambiguous, but important, metaphysical questions and to give specific senses in which various and seemingly contradictory possible answers to them (“Yes” and “No”) can be correct. In its fully developed form, as *syādvāda*, this method delineates seven possible truth-values of any given question—yes, no, both yes and no, ineffability (to which the Buddhist tradition refers as “neither yes nor no”), as well as the three possible non-redundant combinations of these first four.

Anekāntavāda is connected with *syādvāda* as the worldview, or ontology, in terms of which it makes sense to see questions as having different possible correct answers. As an ontology, *anekāntavāda* is the claim that existence is inherently complex, having many facets, each of which can form the basis for a philosophical position about the nature of a real thing. The earliest formal statement of this principle in a Jain text is probably in the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* of Umāsvāti, a text of roughly the second century of the Common Era that is regarded as authoritative by both Śvetāmbara and Digambara Jains. In the twenty-ninth verse of the fifth chapter of this text, existence is said by Umāsvāti to be that which is characterized by “arising, endurance, and perishing.” This is in a marked contrast with the two dominant worldviews of classical Indic thought—the substantialist thinking of the various Brahmanical philosophical systems, which view endurance as the primary trait of that which exists, with arising and perishing being either accidental or merely apparent, and the process thought of Buddhism, which views instantaneous arising and perishing or

impermanence as the primary trait of existence, with endurance or continuity being only apparent.

The entity to which classical Jain commentators most typically apply Umāsvāti's definition of being is the soul, which has both intrinsic, unchanging properties, but which is also subject to the emergence and passing away of a series of impermanent states, due to the effects of karma. The Brahmanical substantialist and Buddhist process approaches to the realm of experience are thus both applicable and valid, so long as one specifies the particular dimension of experience or the facet of reality to which these analyses properly refer. The Jain view, however, represents the total panoramic view of ultimate reality in terms of which the partially correct (but also, therefore, partially incorrect) views of other systems of thought can be situated.

Note that no reference has been made in the historical analysis of anekāntavāda so far to ahiṃsā. Nor does any classical Jain commentator make any explicit connection of anekāntavāda or syādvāda to ahiṃsā. Anekāntavāda, syādvāda, and nayavāda—that is, the doctrine of points of view or perspectives—are explicitly connected *to one another* by Jain authors and form an organic complex to which I refer as the “doctrines of relativity.” But ahiṃsā is not mentioned. These doctrines seem to arise, rather, from a desire, exhibited by Mahāvīra himself in the *Āgama* literature, to give as complete and comprehensive an analysis as possible to important religious and philosophical questions, as well as from a distinctively Jain ontology, presented in the *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, that incorporates elements of both substance and process into a realist metaphysic that affirms both continuity and change. Inasmuch as this system comes into dialogue with the other systems of thought of classical India, it does affirm, charitably, that these systems are rooted in a true insight into the nature of things. But while this system gives with one hand, it also takes away; for though the non-Jain systems are partially correct in their analysis, they are also partly false, inasmuch as they deny the reality of the dimensions of existence to which they fail to be attentive. The superiority of the Jain view is ultimately affirmed as a more full and

comprehensive view. As Paul Dundas and others have pointed out, the Jain doctrines of relativity serve as a powerful polemical weapon in classical Indian philosophical debate.

The vital importance—indeed the absolute centrality—of *ahiṃsā* to Jain thought and practice cannot be overstated. Injunctions to avoid injuring any living being in thought, word, or deed can be found in the earliest Jain texts—*Āgamic* writings like the *Ācārāṅga* and *Sūtrakṛtaṅga*—in which Mahāvīra’s teachings on this topic are presented as emphatic and unambiguous. In another *Āgama*, the *Daśavaikālika Sūtra*, an early Jain manual that outlines the rules of discipline for ascetics, explicit rules are set forth that apply *ahiṃsā* to the realm of speech: “A wise monk does not speak inexpressible truth, truth mixed with falsehood, doubtful truth, or complete falsehood. A wise monk speaks only after careful thought of things uncertain, even of truths, in a manner that may be free from sin, mild, and beyond doubt. Likewise, he does not use harsh words, nor even truth that may cause deep injury, for even these generate bondage to negative karmas. A wise soul, conscious of evil intentions, does not speak words as prohibited above, or any other that may cause harm.”

To the degree that *anekāntavāda* (and its application to discourse in the method of *syādvāda*) does involve a concession of the partial validity of the points of view of other schools of thought, rather than rejecting them completely as wholly pernicious and false, and in the measured, qualified manner in which it sets forth philosophical claims as “in a sense” true and “in a sense” false (*syāt*), it is not unreasonable to see the Jain doctrines of relativity as an extension of the rules of *ahiṃsā* in speech to the realm of philosophical discourse—as “intellectual *ahiṃsā*,” as contemporary writers on Jainism starting with A.B. Dhruva have claimed. But this is an inference (*anumāna*) being made from the point of view of the present, in which virtues such as tolerance and interreligious acceptance are seen to be of great value—and indeed as vital to the future survival of humanity. It is not a connection that is made explicitly in any pre-modern Jain philosophical text. And to the degree that *anekāntavāda* is delinked from the claim that there is a comprehensive view—

the traditional Jain view—in relation to which other perspectives are merely partially true, its full, original import is distorted.

Connecting Anekāntavāda and Ahimsā: A Constructive Approach

Does this historical analysis, however, invalidate the contemporary understanding of many Jains that there exists a profound organic connection between anekāntavāda and ahimsā, to the point that these two ideas can be seen to stand in a relation to one another of theory and practice? That anekāntavāda is the theory of ahimsā and that ahimsā is the practice of anekāntavāda? As mentioned earlier, I wish to argue that this understanding of these two concepts is a valid development of the Jain tradition. For just as we have observed the fully developed, sevenfold method of syādvāda emerging from Mahāvīra's application of the vibhajya method to the avyākata questions of the *āgamic* period, as well as seeing the fully developed version of anekāntavāda emerging from Umāsvāti's terse definition of reality as being characterized by emergence, duration, and perishing, the contemporary linkage of ahimsā to anekāntavāda can be seen as a further unfolding of insights implicit in the teachings of Mahāvīra in response to the needs of changing times. The responsible unfolding of these insights, in a manner that is carefully attentive to the vast and rich textual traditions and practices that the Jain community has inherited, is the task of the constructive philosopher.

In regard to the task of elucidating the concepts of anekāntavāda and ahimsā in relation to one another, as elements in an internally coherent, logical, and organic system of ideas, while building upon the foundation already laid by centuries of Jain intellectual activity, several preliminary observations can be made.

First, *relativity* is not the same as *relativism*. As Cort and others have argued, the worldview put forth by anekāntavāda asserts that there is, indeed, an absolute perspective in terms of which all truth-claims are to be evaluated. This is the perspective of the Jina, the enlightened *kevalin* who has become free from all karmic obstructions to perception and sees reality as it truly is. This absolute perspective is the basis upon which the Jain

worldview is advanced, and faith in this perspective is known, in the words of Umāsvāti, as having a “right view” (*samyag-darśana*). The claims of other traditions are true only *relative to* this absolute perspective. They are only partially, and not absolutely, true.

Second, and in close connection with the first observation that relativity is not the same as relativism, *anekāntavāda* does not posit a universe absent some objective reality to which the various perspectives expressed by diverse traditions are oriented. The Jain worldview is a form of ontological realism, not a subjective idealism or solipsism without a common basis for all of our varied frames of reference. In referring to *anekāntavāda*, *nayavāda*, and *syādvāda* collectively as “doctrines of relativity,” I deliberately chose the term *relativity* rather than *relativism* with Einstein’s usage of this term in mind. For just as the varied frames of reference from which light can be observed do not, in Einstein’s understanding, eliminate the idea of an objective reality—which the existence of a single speed of light in every frame of reference indicates— analogously, the Jain view of reality as having many facets or aspects does not mean that there is no reality *there*, underlying those facets or aspects. The famous parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant is highly instructive here. A thoroughgoing relativism would assert that all that we have are the varied and conflicting perceptions of the blind men, with no basis for saying that there is actually a unitary being—the elephant—that is the referent of these perceptions. But on a Jain understanding, there really is an elephant there. There is a way that reality is, a true nature of existence, and the Jinas have perceived this reality fully and correctly (and have also expressed that perception in the form of the teachings of Jainism).

Third, while an explicit connection between the metaphysic of *anekāntavāda*, as described here, and *ahiṃsā* is not made by pre-modern Jain authors, both concepts are put forth as elements in the same worldview and practice. The task of discerning connections between these two therefore falls properly within the realm of constructive philosophy or theology undertaken from within the Jain tradition—for demonstrating the coherence and internal consistency of the tradition that one inhabits is, one could argue, definitive of the

task of the theologian: *fides quaerens intellectum*, or “faith seeking understanding,” in the formulation of Anselm, whose definition of theology has long been a normative one for Christian theologians. Some may object to the term *theology* to denote intellectual work undertaken in the Jain tradition, preferring *philosophy* due to the theistic connotations of the term *theology*. But regardless of the term one uses, the point is that constructive intellectual work undertaken from within a tradition, taking the inherited wisdom of that tradition as one’s starting point for reflection, contains within its purview the activity of discerning and demonstrating the logical interconnections of that tradition’s intellectual content. It seems to me that showing the logical connections between *anekāntavāda* and *ahiṃsā* fits this description.

Fourth, and again, while an explicit connection between *anekāntavāda* and *ahiṃsā* is not made by pre-modern Jain authors, many of these authors do display an attitude to other traditions that could fairly be characterized in contemporary terms as “tolerant” and even appreciative, and so as consistent with Jain injunctions to *ahiṃsā* in thought, word, and deed. Most notably, the eighth century Jain thinker, Haribhadrasūri, especially in his *Yogaḍṛṣṭisamuccaya*, or *Collection of Views on Yoga*, is willing to entertain the idea—and even to assert—that the state of enlightenment that is experienced by the Jinās of his own tradition is not different from that which is experienced by the enlightened masters of other traditions, and that the differences in these masters’ presentations of their views of reality are due to their having tailored their teaching to the abilities and understandings of their students. “The highest essence of going beyond *saṃsāra* is called *nirvāṇa*. The wisdom gained from discipline is singular in essence, though heard of in different ways. ‘Eternal Śiva, Highest Brahman, Accomplished Soul, Suchness’: With these words one refers to it, though the meaning is one in all the various forms...The variety of teaching is suited according to the ones who are being taught. These great souls are the best healers of the sickness known as ‘worldly existence.’” That is, like a good doctor, an enlightened master can discern which type of medicine and in which amounts will serve each patient

best, though the common goal to which all of these varied treatments lead—good health—is one and the same.

That this inclusive understanding is not incompatible with holding Jainism to be the most true and highest of teachings can be shown in a variety of ways. Other spiritual paths, for example, commend many of the same moral virtues, ascetic and contemplative practices, and states of mind that Jains hold to be necessary to the attainment of *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*. And, according to *anekāntavāda*, the teachings of these same paths do contain a genuine, though incomplete, insight into the ultimate nature of reality. Contemplation of the enduring nature of consciousness, as found in Advaita Vedānta, or of the changing nature of the specific states of consciousness, as found in Buddhism, both have as their object a real aspect of existence, on the Jain understanding—the *dravya*, or substance, and the *pariyāya*, or mode, respectively. To, in effect, let practitioners of these paths be, in a spirit of *ahiṃsā*, in the faith that their spiritual disciplines will lead them, eventually, to a more profound level of understanding—and to the perfection of the practice of *ahiṃsā* that is found in Jainism—is to put the theory that is *anekāntavāda* into practice as *ahiṃsā*.

To be sure, this approach to the religious other is a form of what theologians and philosophers of religion have come to call *inclusivism* rather than *religious pluralism*, the latter position being characterized by an impartial approach to all religions, rather than by a prior situating of oneself in a tradition and then evaluating others, however charitably, in terms of it. As critics of religious pluralism have argued, a truly neutral point of view is impossible this side of omniscience. Jains would cease to be Jains if they did not view Jain teaching as the best and most reliable guide to the highest goal of existence. If one religion is as good as another, why follow any religion at all? For what is the basis for determining the path that one should practice, apart from the fact that one has been born into a particular community? This is radical relativism, which leads to the conclusion that there are different ultimate realities for different communities (which is different from saying that there is one ultimate reality conceptualized in a variety of ways). The

way that one conceptualizes the highest goal of existence, or the very fact that one holds that such a goal exists, has already been shaped by a tradition and a point of view. There is no neutral starting point. If one wishes to maintain a commitment to the truth of one's worldview, while at the same time practicing some level of accommodation of the views and practices of others—perhaps because one's tradition teaches one to do so in the name of *ahiṃsā*—then inclusivism is a logical position to take.

Conclusion

The question for those who are interested in promoting *anekāntavāda* as a form of intellectual *ahiṃsā*, a way of maximally accommodating the beliefs and practices of the other while still maintaining the integrity of one's own, and not lapsing into relativism, is “How much is one willing to learn from the religious other?” Must Jain inclusivism be of a “closed” variety, which only sees other traditions as being true to the extent that they articulate some insight already explicitly present in Jainism? The “*ahiṃsā*” that such an approach could be said to exhibit is arguably quite superficial, or even nonexistent. Or can inclusivism be of an “open” variety, with the possibility of real learning occurring across religious boundaries (a phrase I owe to the contemporary Buddhist thinker, John Makransky)? The historical record in this regard is mixed, suggesting that some Jains through time have only seen other traditions as containing, at best, partial truths already contained fully in Jainism, but that other Jains have been quite open to learning across religious boundaries. Haribhadrasūri is again a pre-eminent example of the latter, having delved deeply into the yoga literatures of both Buddhist and Brahmanical practitioners. Another is the more recent Jain thinker, the seventeenth century Yaśovijaya, who delved deeply into the Brahmanical Navya Nyāya school of thought, even contributing to its literature. And the Jain community in general has also engaged extensively with the wider religious culture of India, participating in shared festivals, such as Dīwali, honoring shared deities, such as Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī, and, particularly outside of India, sharing ritual space with Hindus, as in the Hindu-Jain temples of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

It seems, then, that historical precedent does exist on the basis of which one may argue that *anekāntavāda* and *ahiṃsā* fit together as elements in a coherent, organic view of reality: an open inclusivism that affirms the partial truth of other traditions, and also allows for learning and even participation across religious boundaries, while maintaining the integrity of the distinctive Jain worldview and practice. Bringing *anekāntavāda* and *ahiṃsā* together as theory and practice, respectively, entails an ongoing engagement in dialogue and reflection: dialogue to determine just what it is that the other believes and does, and reflection on how these beliefs and practices might connect with truths already discerned in the Jain worldview, or how, even if not already explicitly stated within it, they might be consistent with and capable of assimilation within it. This is a process that Jains have already been engaged in for centuries—indeed, millennia. All that is new is the form of expression that this process has taken: the idea, explicitly stated, that *anekāntavāda* is a form of intellectual *ahiṃsā*.