

How *Anekāntika* is *Anekānta*?  
Some Reflections on the Jain Theory of  
*Anekāntavāda*

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Jain philosophical thought, as is well known, is centered around the concepts of *anekāntavāda*, *syādvāda* and *saptabhaṅginaya*. The three concepts are intimately related to each other and provide the foundation for Jain metaphysics, epistemology and logic respectively. But even amongst these, the concept of *anekānta* is foundational as it provides the justification for the epistemological doctrine of *syādvād* which in its own turn is articulated in the form of *saptabhaṅginaya*. However, though the relation between the ontological contention and the epistemological and logical formulation is close, it is not so tightly knit that one cannot conceive of different epistemological or logical formulations even if one were to hold the ontological contention regarding the *anekāntic* nature of reality. But what exactly is meant, or could possibly be meant, by the contention that the nature of reality is intrinsically and *anekāntic* in character?

The term '*anekānta*' does not provide any clue except the negative one that it must be more than one. But that does not help us much, for it leaves the possibility open that it may be any number, excluding the numerical singularities of characteristics. The term, however, has usually been understood as standing for 'indefinite' or 'infinite'. But both these interpretations of the term are highly unsatisfactory. The term 'infinite' is too precise in the post-Cantor mathematics with transfinite numbers to be of any help in understanding the characteristics of reality as essentially '*anekāntic*' in character.

\*This article was occasioned by Prof. Tushar K. Sarkar's article entitled 'Some Reflections on Jaina Anekāntavāda and Syādvāda', published in the *Jadavpur Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. IV, No. 2, 1992, pp. 13-35. However, it has only tangential relation to it, even though, in my opinion, it is one of the most original discussions on the subject that I have seen for a long time.

Possibly what is meant is that no finite set of predicates can ever exhaust the nature of reality. But if this is the contention, there is nothing extraordinary about it, as it is not an unusual contention regarding the nature of ultimate reality whenever it is sought to be positively described. On the other hand, as each characterization is ordinarily meaningful only when it excludes other characterizations that are opposed or incompatible with it, all characterizations are denied of ultimate reality as nothing in principle can be excluded from it. Both the positive and the negative moves are well known in the history of philosophical thought, even though it is not quite clear as to how the negative valuational characteristics can ever be accepted as being ultimately real. The difficulty is usually attempted to be overcome by taking recourse to the view that the negative valuational apprehension in respect to reality is primarily due to the incompleteness, ignorance and finitude of the apprehending consciousness and therefore does not belong to that which is regarded as 'really real'.

The Jain position may be regarded as novel in the sense that what has usually been said regarding ultimate reality is supposed by them to characterize objects of ordinary apprehension as well. The usual examples given by them seem to corroborate this. But as the Jains also postulate the 'reality' of an omniscient human being, that is, Mahāvīra, and admit the possibility of such beings in their system, the first question that needs to be clarified is whether the reality is *anekāntic* for a *sarvajña* or not. For if it be held that it is not so for a *sarvajña*, or a being who is omniscient, then the doctrine cannot be regarded as ontological in character. On the other hand, if the *sarvajña* also sees the reality as *anekāntic* in character, then at least the doctrines of *syādvāda* and *saptabhaṅginaya* will not apply in his case. In fact, they will be seen to result from the ignorance of a finite and imperfect being who does not know that he is such and hence mistakenly thinks that what he alone knows is true, that is, is *aikāntic* in character. But once one realizes that one is finite and imperfect, what would be the point of adding *syad* to it except to remind oneself once again that though what one knows is only *aikāntic*, but really is *anekāntic* in character? This reminder, however, would be pointless, for the reality one would know will always be *aikāntic* in character and that alone should provide the basis for one's action.

What exactly is this reminder? And, what does it exactly mean to say that though reality appears to be *aikāntic*, it is not really so, but is *anekāntic* in nature. First, does it really 'appear' to us, finite and imperfect beings as we are, to be *aikāntic* in nature? A rose, for example,

'appears' to us as being red or pink or yellow, depending on the colour it has. But it also 'appears' to us to have a certain shade along with its brightness and intensity and fragrance and beauty and that it is a half-opened bud or a full-bloomed flower. One may add to these as many other characteristics as one likes, say, the softness of its petals, its shape and its size, its being on a short or tall green stem, its distance from other flowers, and so on. All these, it should be remembered, appear fused together in one's consciousness and are separated only for purposes of description and analysis.

Ordinarily, apprehension is thus intrinsically *anekāntic* in character, and not *aikāntic* which needs to be corrected by the Jain insight. But then the apprehending consciousness, it may be said, tends to invest this *anekāntic* apprehension with a 'permanence' which it does not possess, and which the Jain doctrine of *syādvāda* seeks to rectify by reminding one of the essential impermanence of each such characterization. This would obviously be a Buddhist interpretation of the Jain doctrine. The Buddhist's is a far more radical doctrine as it seeks to question not the illusory permanence imposed by the apprehending consciousness, but the very determinate, positive nature of what is apprehended. The '*anekānta*' itself, it may be said, should be understood in the light of the doctrines of *syādvāda* and *nayavāda*, and not the other way round, as we have been trying to do. The very characterization of anything in any way is questionable, as the denial of that characterization is equally legitimate and, as both are legitimate, it has to be jointly and simultaneously characterized in terms of both its affirmation and negation.

The negative characterization, however, is both too wide and too vacuous to be regarded as significant in terms of actual predication, for if, say, there is such a thing as a red rose and we are saying that 'this rose is red' we are not only denying that it has other colours, but also the fact that it is an elephant or any of the other myriad things which are not meant by the term 'rose' in the English language. But what could possibly be meant by saying that the object designated by the term 'rose' is not any of these things? It is, of course, being assumed that the other terms are not synonymous of the term 'rose', just as it is being assumed that the term 'rose', itself a homonym designating other things, is used in different contexts.

One must distinguish, therefore, between different kinds of meaningful denial which may possibly be asserted in a situation. The denial that the rose is something which is not a rose is radically different from the denial that the 'redness' that it possesses is some

other colour which is not red. One may, of course, think of the rose itself as a predicate belonging to some ultimate 'substance' which takes many forms, only one of which is what we name as 'rose'. This is what is implicitly stated in such a sentence as 'This is a rose' where 'this' refers to that indeterminate substance to which 'rose' is being ascribed as a temporary manifestation of itself. Spinoza might have meant some such thing as this when he argued that there is only one substance which is identical with reality itself, as it alone has the ground of its being within itself. The rose that we see obviously does not have the ground of its being within itself as it comes into being and disappears again without our knowing, except very tentatively; we cannot say how it has come to be and why it has disappeared, or become 'non-being'. In a sense, modern physics also tends to think in the same way as it tries to see everything as a specific form of one ultimate force which thus is treated as the ultimate ground of all there is. It is, of course, true that the four ultimate forces that are known to physicists have not been unified until now, but the relative success of Abdul Salam in this direction by unifying at least two of these forces suggests that the ideal is not intrinsically unattainable. But the *anekāntic* character in this perspective would belong only to this ultimate substance, force, or reality and not to any specific object that we ordinarily know. It would be something like the indeterminate Brahman or the pure *Sein* of Heidegger if it be assumed that all the specific *Da-seins* or the particular objects are truly modifications of the Brahman or the same being. The Upaniṣads had already talked of something akin to this when they said '*rūpam, rūpam pratirūpo babhūva*'. However, it will be difficult to say that the Jain view is like any of these, for normally it is supposed to maintain the doctrine of *anekāntavāda* in respect to the ordinary thing that we perceive.

One might interpret the doctrine with respect to an ordinary object in the context of the notion of possibility, as normally one holds that before an event occurs or a thing comes into being it was 'possible'. This 'possibility' is always a determinate possibility and yet it is held that it has come into being. But the ontological status of a determining unactualized possibility has never been seriously discussed in the literature on the subject. Professor Quine, who tried to open the discussion in his well-known paper 'On What There Is' did not directly deal with the issue of what exactly is meant by the notion of something being possible. There is the usual distinction between the 'possible' and the 'probable' based on the ground that while the latter is warranted by our empirical knowledge, the former is

grounded on the fact that what is being asserted as possible is not logically impossible, that is, self-contradictory. Empirical knowledge is itself changing and hence what seems improbable in the light of past knowledge becomes not only probable but even actual later. As for the notion of the logically impossible or that which is self-contradictory, it is only clear in the context of a purely formal detective system, but even there it depends upon the postulates that have been assumed for the system.

The notion of an 'unactualized possibility' with respect to anything, thus, suggests the thing cannot be completely understood in terms of what it manifestly appears to be, but that it has hidden possibilities which may at any time manifest themselves and thus surprise us by their appearance. Some of these hidden properties have been mentioned in the literature as 'dispositional properties' as they are actualized only when certain conditions are fulfilled. To say, for example, that sugar is dissolvable in water only means that in case it is put in water, it will dissolve. But if such a condition is never realized, one will never know whether it dissolves or not. However, many of these properties are known and ascribed to objects, for we know that they have manifested those properties when those conditions have obtained. But as we cannot know all the properties that an object will display under all the possible conditions under which it may be placed, many of these properties are never known to us and yet by the very fact that an object when it comes in relation to other objects displays unexpected characteristics, it may be supposed to have them.

The contention that reality is *anekāntic* in character may then be taken to mean that an object has an indefinite number of unactualized probabilities along with those that are actually known to us. In other words the actual manifested properties of an object do not exhaust its reality and hence it is an illusion to think that it has only those finite sets of properties which it manifests to us. However, even if we understand the Jain contention in this way, we will still have to distinguish between the unactualized possibilities of one object from those of another, as otherwise it would become meaningless to regard them as two different objects. The difference between one object and another object must ultimately be in the fact that one possesses certain characteristics which the other one does not. Also, one may have to distinguish between the actualized and the unactualized possibilities, not only because many of the latter may not be known to us, but also because the distinction itself is important and is the ground of the assertion of the so-called *anekāntic* character of an

object. The two sets of qualities cannot, then, be simultaneously asserted of an object without adding the words 'actual' and 'possible' to them. The possible qualities are not actually present in the object and these cannot be ascribed to it in the same sense as those which are supposed to be present. Thus there is a necessary temporal element in the ascription and the simultaneity of assertion cannot overcome this intrinsic temporal limitation, especially with reference to those objects which are essentially spatio-temporal in nature. The present qualities which are 'actual' may, of course, fade away and thus not belong to the object to which they once belonged. The coming into being and passing away of qualities, however, cannot make them simultaneously present and absent as the Jain epistemologist would want us to believe.

The situation, of course, is different with respect to those objects which do not have a spatio-temporal nature such as the objects of mathematical knowledge. They are supposed to have all their properties simultaneously present in them even though we may not know all of them because of our ignorance. But, though the distinction between the actual and the possible properties will not operate in the same way that it does with those objects which are essentially spatio-temporal in nature, their *anekāntikta* would also have to be different in the case of different objects if these differences are to be preserved.

The term '*anekāntic*' might be taken to imply that an object develops 'new' relational properties by virtue of coming into relationships with other objects, and that these kinds of emergent properties are ultimately indefinite in number. While in the realm of mathematics, the possible and the 'actual' may be deemed to coincide in the sense that if some number is shown to be mathematically possible, it is taken to be mathematically real as well, it is not so with other kinds of objects. Even in the case of mathematics if one opts for 'intuitionism' and does not accept 'indirect proof' then many mathematical entities usually accepted as real cannot be accepted to be so. And, even in the case of spatio-temporal objects where the distinction between the 'actual' and the 'possible' radically obtains, everything that is possible need not become actual. In case one were not to accept this, one would treat the possible as if it were necessary.

There is also the problem that if one possibility is actualized, others cannot be. The realization of one possibility itself means the exclusion of those which are opposed to it, or different from it. Moreover, what is 'actualized' has a causal efficacy and this not only closes doors to possibilities different from itself, but also opens doors

for others just by virtue of the fact that it has come into being.

The Jain thought about *anekānta* not only ignores all this complexity, but also fails to come to grips with the notion of 'impossibility' which would obviously set a limit to the *anekāntic* character of the *anekānta*. There cannot be such things as 'square circles' or 'a barren woman's son' and, if so, one cannot assert both 'is' and 'is not' of them, as the Jain logician wants to do. In fact, the term '*asti*' and '*nasti*', which the Jains use in this context, are highly ambiguous, for all sorts of things do not 'exist' in the same way. A character in Kalidas' plot does not 'exist' in the same way as a historical personage nor does the square of  $-1$  or, say, the Himalayas.

The theory of *anekānta*, therefore, has to be detached from both the theories of *syādvāda* and its formulation in the doctrine of *saptabhāṅginaya*. The addition of '*syad*' or 'conditionality' to every assertion makes no sense as the moment one specifies the conditions which are presupposed by or under which the assertion is being made, it becomes unconditional. Similarly, to say that the simultaneous assertion of '*asti*' and '*nasti*' is to say something which is *avaktavya*, if the joint assertion of '*asti*' and '*nasti*' is justified from any point of view. To hold the latter position, as the Jain thinkers do, and still regard them as 'unspeakables' because it *involves* a contradiction, is to fall back into the old way of thinking, for in the new way they are *not* contradictories at all.

The doctrine of *anekānta*, however, runs into another difficulty, at least within the Jain perspective. The Jains carry, like all the other schools of Indian philosophy, a lot of metaphysical baggage. One of these is the notion of '*sarvajñā*' which is so foundational to their thought that they cannot give it up. And, unfortunately for them, the person whom they regard as *sarvajñā* has made definite pronouncements about which there can be no *anekāntikata* at all. According to the Mahāvīra, space is finite and so is a *dravya*, while both *kāla* and *paryāya* are infinite. This, he is supposed to have said when he was asked whether '*siddhi*' is both *santa* and *ananta*, that is, has an end or is unending. The answer may be seen as saying that '*siddhi*' is both *santa* and *ananta* from different points of view, and hence supports the *anekāntic* position. But it does not do so, as these are *not* forms of sensitivity or categories of understanding in the Kantian sense. They are supposed to be 'objectively' real, as the distinction between 'finite' and 'infinite' will not make any sense, if it were not so. In fact, *dik* or space is given exact quantitative measurement in Jain thinkers, and it cannot be more or less than this. Similarly, *dravya* and *paryāya* are

not like substance and qualities, categories in the Aristotelian sense, but rather ontological entities.

The metaphysical baggage of the Jains extends far beyond these and they have no doubt about it. And there is no hint of there being any 'syad' in their assertion or any idea of their being *anekāntic* in character. These epithets are only reserved for their opponents, or for positions different from their own. All the others are supposed to be based on a one-sided *dṛṣṭi*, but their own view is another *dṛṣṭi*. Rather, it is the *samagra dṛṣṭi*, encompassing *all* the others, both actual and possible and thus alone 'true'.

The issue of *anekāntikata*, then, will have to be disengaged from the doctrines of *syādvāda* and *śabdatābhāṅginaya*, but also from the way Jain thinkers have thought about it. The Jains may want to 'own' it, but the 'ownership' of thought is as illusory as the ownership of anything else. And, even if it be conceded that the doctrine originated amongst the Jains, it need not remain their 'monopoly' forever. All ideas 'originated' with some person in some particular culture or civilization, but basically they are the property of all human kind. Philosophical thought need not be treated as an exception to this. It is time, therefore, that such 'parochial' identifications are given up, even though many eminent thinkers, particularly in the West, continue to do so. One need not quarrel over the heritage that various civilizations have bequeathed to us, as one does in respect to wealth or power which is more difficult to give up. Let at least the realm of ideas remain untouched by the 'egoisms' and 'pettinesses' that seem to plague the human family since the beginning of history.

## Does the Idea of *Niṣkāma Karma* rest on a Mistake?

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The purpose of this paper is to find out an answer to the question, 'Does the idea of *niṣkāma karma* rest on a mistake?' But before finding an answer to this question we have to first ascertain what exactly is meant by the idea of *niṣkāma karma*? Answer to the first question logically depends upon answer to the second question. And when we go through different writings of the Indian scholars, we find that there is no agreement between them on the issue as to what exactly is meant by the idea of *niṣkāma karma*? Three extreme positions are generally held in this regard. Those who interpret the idea of *niṣkāma karma* in absolutistic sense say that the essence of the idea of *niṣkāma karma* consists in the dictum of 'duty for the sake of duty'. For them, the idea of *niṣkāma karma* purports the view that duties be performed under all circumstances irrespective of the consequences. It tells us that we should continue to do our duties no matter whether these are of *sāmānya dharma* or *varṇa dharma* or *āśrama dharma* or *rāja dharma* or *kula dharma* or *deśa dharma* or *yuga dharma* or any other *dharma*, out of a sense of duty and to the best of our abilities, and with pure mind and without any attachment for the fruit. The doctrine of *niṣkāma karma*, in their view, treats duty as a supreme concept. It does not rest the idea of duty on anything beyond itself. But those who interpret the idea of *niṣkāma karma* in relativistic sense say that it does not dismiss completely the idea of fruit. It dismisses only the idea of some specified type of the fruit. For them, the idea of *niṣkāma karma* does contain in its meaning an element of conditionality. It qualifies duties as a means to the attainment of *lokasaṃgraha* and *mokṣa*. And wherever it is said that we ought to do our duties in disinterested manner it has been said, in their view, not because of this reason that doing one's duty in disinterested manner is something which is good on its own account but because of this reason that doing one's duty in disinterested manner is something which is conducive to social benefits and individual salvation. For them, the essence of the idea

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