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## **DEFINITELY MAYBE: THE REALM OF PERSPECTIVE & TRUTH IN JAINISM**

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One of the central doctrines of Jainism is *anekantavada*, the idea that reality is many-faceted. This can be generally understood as relativism [Radhakrishnan, Moore, 1967: p. 261]. Within this Jainist principle of what could be called the “multi-perspective”, they acknowledge that no point of view or perception can be a complete truth but can only be considered a partial truth. So then the question arises, does Jainism believe in an ultimate truth, or hold a unified understanding of reality? In order to answer this question we will first look at the doctrines that make-up the Jainist conception of relativism. Secondly we will look into how the central idea of Jainist life, *ahimsa*, non-violence, serves an essential function to their understanding of reality. Thirdly we will explore the canon of Jainism, looking into the teachings of Mahavir and the definition of a Jina, being that of a pure and omniscient soul. I will argue that the structure of the Jain doctrine of relativity suggests a way of living in which the ability to see things from different viewpoints is an integral gateway to understanding reality, a truth that underlies only the partial truths that inhabit the phenomenal world [Jaini, 2014: p. 93].

Jainism claims that since reality is complex, no single proposition can express the nature of reality fully. Three concepts of logic and reasoning are used in Jainism to understand the nature of reality: *anekanta*, *navavada*, and *syadvada*. *Anekanta* literally means ‘non-one-sided’. Nothing in reality can be reduced to a single concept or particular characteristic [Long, 2015: p. 117].

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*Nayavada*, is the concept that there are always multiple viewpoints, or *nayas*, that can describe any particular one thing. And *syadvada*, sometimes referred to as the ‘maybe doctrine’, is the philosophical practice in which all viewpoints are to be predicated on uncertainty by thinking that maybe things exist, maybe they do not, maybe they do and don’t exist, and if so, maybe these previous conditions are ineffable and unknowable in themselves. Many could suggest that with such a metaphysical philosophy how could an individual know right from wrong? How could one find meaning in life? Isn’t this nihilism? One of the overall purposes of the doctrine is to not be mistaken or cause one to accumulate karma by making false assumptions. In Jainism, the act of assuming or judging incorrectly is seen as a much greater harm than that of not knowing right from wrong. “This was not a form of skepticism, merely an acknowledgment that linguistic expressions relating to the world ought to be structured with appropriate awareness of the nature of the reality being described” [Dundas, 2016: p. 232].

Let us demonstrate these concepts by looking at two allegories and one real life example. In Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, three men spend their life chained inside a cave within which they are only able to perceive shadows created by a fire. One day one of the prisoners is let out and is able to perceive the “reality” of the outside world. He returns to tell the other men within the cave of his experience. Having known no other reality, they reject the man’s claims outright. Plato claimed that knowledge gained through the senses is no more than opinion and that, in order to have real knowledge, we must gain it through philosophical reasoning. In the classic Jain parable of the blind men and the elephant, several blind men are asked to describe an elephant, each feels a part of the elephant and each gives a different answer. Each answer is correct in describing an attribute of the elephant, but only partially correct when describing the elephant as a whole [Long, 2015: p. 118]. Another story, that aptly depicts how we can only understand the world from our own individual perspective, is that of a pygmy who spent his whole life underneath the canopy of his forest dwelling in Africa. Anthropologist Colin Turnbull tells the story of bringing the man out of the forest and onto a plateau where he viewed a vast valley of grasslands for the first time and looked upon the antelope in the distance. Having no previous experience with the breadth of such distance and space he thought that the antelope might be bugs just beyond his reach. So possessing only partial knowledge of what he was seeing, he soon became extremely frightened and ran right back into the forest [Turnbull, 1961: p. 138].

Because certainty rules out possibility, it rejects reality as multi-faceted and adheres the individual to an attachment of reality as unchangeable. For Jains, the ‘doctrine of maybe’ keeps their souls free from the encumbrance of karma so they may achieve moksha. This implies that an all-encompassing reality, for Jains, lies beyond anything that might be known in this world. Haribhadra, a famed Jainist philosopher, noted that “certain things are beyond the realm of sensory perception, for otherwise logicians would have come to some degree of correct understanding of them...thus, in the last resort, wrangling over metaphysical questions

can be said to be self-defeating. The ultimate truth transcending all states of the worldly existence and called nirvana is essentially and necessarily one even if designated by different names” [Dundas, 2016: p. 229].

Whether the doctrine of *ahimsa* was historically intended to serve that of *anekantavada* seems debatable. Although it seems clear that the principle of non-violence seems to be served well by relativism. Jeffrey Long states, “...inasmuch as textual evidence indicates that, historically, even if the doctrines of relativity were not necessarily designed with *ahimsa* in mind, there are Jain writers who did put them to what could be called tolerant or non-violent uses.” Since we know Jainism believes all beings can incur a sense of pain, and the fact that they created a hierarchy enumerating which beings have the most and least amount of senses to do as little harm as possible to such beings, underlies the fact that they have used their doctrine of viewpoints, *nyayas*, in order to do just that. This further points toward Jainism possessing the idea of an incontrovertible truth. It should not matter if one of the primary goals of *ahimsa* was to rid themselves of as much karma as possible, being an intentionally selfish goal, because it nevertheless points toward the fact that they first had to recognize the common reality of pain [Long, 2015: p. 161].

Mahavir is considered by Jains to be the last of the 24 *tirthankaras*, and is generally considered to be the historical founder of Jainism. The *tirthankaras* are considered Jinas, those who are ‘spiritual conquerors’ and have become omniscient, pure souls [Puligandla, 2008: p. 23]. On the surface of it, it seems self-evident that if a religion has in its scriptural canon a set of omniscient beings who have achieved enlightenment one could assume that their philosophy would have some sort of understanding of ultimate truth. Long writes that the “initial foundation in Mahavir’s omniscience underscores the importance for Jain philosophy of the existence of a unique, absolute perspective from which the relative validity of all other perspectives can be perceived and proclaimed.” Mahavir’s teaching proclaims that everything is permanence and change. He proclaimed the soul and the world to be eternal and non-eternal. By using sets of seemingly contradictory statements and concepts, Mahavir was able to create a philosophy of relativity that could lead an individual into the transcendental. “Its affirmation of an absolute perspective is why this philosophy, in spite of its affirmation of relativity, is not a pure or thoroughgoing relativism; for it maintains the existence of an absolute perspective which grounds the relativity of all other perspectives, a perspective to which all other perspectives are relative” [Long, 2015: p. 122].

William Blake once wrote, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.” [Blake, 2016: p. 35]. So what I believe we can conclude from the above inquiry is that the practice of *anekantavada* is meant to prepare one’s soul for moksha, so that the mind’s tendency to remain rigid and set within one’s own preconceptions and expectations doesn’t hinder the soul’s path into moksha. Padmanabh S. Jaini says this of the Jainism idea about the nature of reality: “This complexity of the existent – its simultaneous unity and

multiplicity, eternity and transience – finds expression in the Jaina term *anekanta*, manifold aspects, which purports to fully describe the existent's nature" [Jaini, 2014: p. 91]. Jainism does not seek to provide a concrete doctrine of what IS ultimate truth but rather a doctrine that provides a PATH toward the ultimate truth.

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One of the central doctrines of Jainism is *anekantavada*, the idea that reality is many-faceted. It means that no point of view or perception can be a complete truth but can only be considered a partial truth. And since reality is complex, no single proposition can express the nature of reality fully. So the author argues that the structure of the Jain doctrine of relativity suggests a way of living in which the ability to see things from different viewpoints is an integral gateway to understanding reality. Summarizing, the author concludes that Jainism does not seek to provide a concrete doctrine of what IS ultimate truth but rather a doctrine that provides a PATH toward the ultimate truth.

*Keywords:* Jainism, *anekantavada*, multi-perspective, ultimate /partial truth.

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