

Anekāntavāda and *Syādvāda*

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Anekāntavāda, or the theory of the multiplexity of reality (lit. “non-onesidedness”) is the best-known contribution of Jainism (see JAINA PHILOSOPHY AND JAINISM) to Indian philosophy. It involves a very particular realist ontology and a corresponding epistemology and elaborate semantics, and splits into three subtheories.

According to this theory, the structure of any thing primarily consists of three interrelated aspects: substance (*dravya*), which preserves its self-identity and is quasi-permanent; qualities (*guṇa*), which invariably accompany it; and incessantly changing modes (*pariyāya*), qualifying substances and qualities. In addition, everything exists simultaneously in three correlated natural states: origination, continued existence, and cessation. This ontology presents a complex world of things which are interconnected with infinite relations, and necessarily it is impossible to fully express in language even a single thing which is so related. A general maxim states: “Every sentence functions with a restriction,” viz. with limited verbal means, every statement conveys merely a partial description of the complex state of affairs, with the remaining part having to be supplied by the context. To handle this multiplex structure of reality, Jainism developed an equally complex epistemology, consisting of threefold analysis: the theory of sevenfold modal description (*syādvāda*, *saptabhaṅgī*), the theory of viewpoints (*nayavāda*), and the theory of the four standpoints (*nikṣepavāda*, *nyāsavāda*).

Best known of the three is *Syādvāda*, sometimes also called the theory of conditioned predication. The method rests on seven complementary statements, or figures, as reflected in its other name *Saptabhaṅgī* (lit. “seven-figure theory”), which are believed to present a comprehensive picture of a particular object, each predicating a particular property of it from a particular perspective. The name derives from *syāt* (lit. “may be”), which is a sentential functor meaning “in a certain sense” or “from a particular perspective” (symbolized below as σ):

1. “In a certain sense / σ : x is P” (*syāt asti*),
2. “ σ : x is non-P” (*syāt na asti*),
3. “ σ : x is P, and σ : x is non-P” (*syāt asti syāt na asti*),
4. “ σ : x is inexpressible” (*syāt avaktavyam*),
5. “ σ : x is P, and σ : x is inexpressible” (*syāt asti syāt avaktavyam*),
6. “ σ : x is non-P, and σ : x is inexpressible” (*syāt na asti syāt avaktavyam*),
7. “ σ : x is P, σ : x is non-P, and σ : x is inexpressible” (*syāt asti syāt na asti syāt avaktavyam*).

Each of the above is considered true, i.e. each is assigned a positive truth value. The elementary figure is the first one: *syāt asti*, which literally might mean: “it could be

(*syāt*) that ... is (*asti*).” However, the theory is formulated in a technical language, often misunderstood. The verb (*asti*: “is” or “exists”) is a copula (“is”), connecting a subject (x) and its predicate (P), and does not express existence of anything as such.

The parameters of the sentential functor *syāt* (σ) are of two orders. The first-order parameters may comprise infinite perspectives, the basic ones being substance, place, time, and condition, but also a particular quality, mode, spatial extension, name, form, material representation, transformation, etc. For instance, an interpretation of figure 1 (σ : x is P) may state: “with respect to substance, pot x is made of clay P.” In negative sentences, what is roughly symbolized as “non-P” effectively stands for a negation of a property different from P, say, non-Q, etc.; for instance, figure 2 states: “with respect to substance, pot x is not made of brass (non-Q).” Further, the second-order parameters refer to the properties (P, non-Q, etc.) that are predicated of an object x and that can be either emphasized (explicitly expressed) or not emphasized (implied) in actual statements: it is practically impossible to have two properties simultaneously emphasized or two properties simultaneously not emphasized in natural language, which is an explanation of the “inexpressible.” A seeming contradiction in figures such as the third one (“ σ : x is P, and σ : x is non-P”) or in the conjunction of figures 1 and 2, etc., does not arise because the properties are predicated of an object from different perspectives, for instance the predicates are indexed with two different parameters or two different predicates are intended (P and a negation of its opposite, but not of its contradictory, viz. “P and non-Q” [not: “P and non-P”], for instance: “with respect to substance, pot x is made of clay, and pot x is not made of brass”). Thus, the model is that of modal logic with two orders of parameters and follows standard logic, retaining the law of noncontradiction and traditional negation.

The point of departure of *Syādvāda* is the need for an epistemologically satisfactory description of a thing, necessarily forming a complex whole, being connected with infinite other things through infinite relations, both positive (“ x is ...”) and negative (“ x is not ...”). In this sense, the model combines both logic and semantics. The semantic ranges of the seven figures do not overlap: each presents a distinct locutionary act which introduces a new perspective or reveals a new aspect of the thing under description from among its innumerable aspects. On the one hand, the model is intended to provide a possibly complete description of a thing through a wide range of true statements that can be made about the thing, and, on the other, it helps allocate the proper contexts for true statements about the thing.

Potentially, the *syādvāda* theory is a powerful semantic tool to disambiguate sentences which are necessarily incomplete, both in natural languages and in philosophical discourse. It should be distinguished from its two corollaries within the theory of the multiplexity of reality (*anekāntavāda*). The prime aim of the theory of viewpoints (*nayavāda*) is to formally decide in which contexts (primarily seven, from most unspecific and generic to most particularized and temporalized) any statement – which typically stands in need of disambiguation – holds true and in which it does not, something every natural language user does on an everyday basis in an unreflected manner. It is also different from the theory of the four standpoints

(*nikṣepavāda*, *nyāsavāda*), which distinguishes four basic semantic layers of any term or word: substance, place, time, and actual condition.

Two interpretative approaches to *Syādvāda* can be distinguished (Balcerowicz 2015, 184–195). The reductionist interpretation attempts to present its historical structure the way it was originally formulated by Jaina philosophers, whereas the constructivist interpretation, predominant nowadays, uses it as a point of departure to develop new systems of logic, inspired by the original historical model, such as many-valued logic (especially seven-valued logic), paraconsistent logic, or probabilistic logic, which do not reflect the historical archetype.

Traditionally, the Jainas resorted to the theory in order, first, to advance their religious claim of complete omniscience (*kevala*) (see OMNISCIENCE) possessed by the Jinās (“Victors”) (see JAINA PHILOSOPHY AND JAINISM), who represented the religious ideal of Jainism, and second, to promote the superiority of their own religion as the only one capable of a proper, comprehensive analysis of reality and of revealing epistemic limits of all other belief systems. Arguably, it is only a recent development within Jainism, albeit with no historical basis, that the theory of the multiplexity of reality is also used to vindicate the Jaina claim of their genuine religious tolerance (Cort 2000).

See also: JAINA PHILOSOPHY AND JAINISM; OMNISCIENCE

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FURTHER READING

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