Anekāntavāda: The Compassionate Search for the Truth

By Parveen Jain

Everyone considers truthfulness to be an honorable trait. It is respected and expected in all interactions among people, corporations and governments. Each one of us is born into this world as a truthful, innocent, infant and we are relentlessly trained by our parents, teachers and mentors to be honest. Every religious and spiritual philosophy teaches us to be trustworthy as well. All of us recognize and appreciate the virtue of this essential value, yet somehow, we ignore it on a regular basis.

Why is it that a trait that is so engrained into our personality is so often flagrantly disregarded?

Perhaps, the answer resides in the definition of the truth itself. Truthfulness has long been the subject of academic and psychology investigations,[1,2] and is generally associated with how we communicate information. Truthful communication occurs when, after comprehending and establishing the authenticity of a piece of information, one communicates it honestly and factually to the best of one's abilities. Sometimes one is not able to fully comprehend the information, but nevertheless, attempts to transmits it. In this case, the conveyed information may be inconsistent with the actual facts, but when it is done honestly, the act may not be considered deceptive because it is not a deliberate act of misrepresentation.

However, when one has correctly comprehended information but manipulates it with some specific agenda in mind and communicates it in a way that is not compliant with one's own perception of the known facts, it becomes a dishonest and untruthful communication. Such an act is tantamount to falsefully communicating a known truth.

For instance, if one were to broadcast the idea that COVID-19 is just another flu virus while knowing and comprehending that it is a new and highly dangerous virus strain with much higher fatality rate than the ordinary flu, then one would be deliberately misrepresenting the facts. Such a communication, with an intent to misguide the recipients, is an outright dishonest representation of the known facts. It is deception.

In addition to "truth" and "untruth," there are two other modes of communication regarding the quality of truthfulness: "truth mixed with untruth", and "neither truth nor untruth" (as discussed by Peter Flügel[3]). The mode "truth mixed with untruth" constitutes a rendering of a partially truthful communication either deliberately or inadvertently which may or may not be deceptive. An example would be if one says, "I am going to San Francisco via Palo Alto," but actually takes a different route due to bad traffic on the original route. Such an expression could be a truth (for example, "going to San Francisco") mixed with an untruth (for example, "via Palo Alto") that may be either a deliberate or unintentional misrepresentation. An example of dubious communication would be when someone says, "we are going to meet George just to talk and not to harm him," whereas the real intention was to meet and hurt George.

The statements that are "neither truth nor untruth" are statements that are not truth-bearing statements. They do not distinguish between truth and untruth or such a distinction is not applicable. The examples of such statements would be ordering someone to "go home," or asking a question "where are you going?"

In addition to the four modes of communications discussed above, there is whole different realm of truthfulness which stems from one's perception of the truth itself. Although truthful presentation of the known facts as discussed above is essential to ethical living, in reality, an ordinary individual is not capable of perceiving the absolute truth – the real truth upon which all other truths are contingent and/or are derived from, or the perspective that can account for all other perspectives and see the truth in them. This premise of "the absolute truth" and our inability to fully grasp it has been studied in great depths by the Jain thinkers, and multiple profound scriptures and numerous philosophical interpretations have been composed.

According to Jain philosophy, one's accounting of "the known facts" is highly personalized and perspectival, and it is far from being the complete or absolute truth. As much as we strongly believe that "my truth" is "the absolute truth," this belief is flawed at its core. We must understand that, within the bounds of our intellect and our abilities of expression, we can observe and comprehend only one or just a few of the numerous possible aspects of the truth about the entirety of an entity. According to the Jain philosophy, in general, all of us have this limitation – only extraordinary individuals who have attained clairvoyance and have become omniscient have the ability to perceive and reveal the absolute and complete truth.

To illustrate this point, consider the case of kneeling during the playing of the national anthem in sports activities in America:

> Colin Kaepernick is an African American football player who, in September 2016, started the practice of kneeling during the playing of the national anthem with the intention to create awareness regarding police brutality and oppression of people of color. He has stated to have no intention to disrespect the military personnel or the nation at all.
>
> Some people view this to be protesting as being against the country itself and not against racism (*Marc Thiessen, Washington Post, June 16, 2020*).
>
> Other people think kneeling during the national anthem is "the beauty of America" (*Aaron Judge of New York Yankees, July 22, 2020*) and was a laudable action on the part of Mr. Kaepernick.

There could be scores of other wide-ranging views regarding the issue of "kneeling during the playing of the national anthem in sports activities in America." In pursuit of all the facts and the wholesome truth behind the act of "kneeling" and the reasons behind it, while some of the perspectives may have varying degrees of mistruth contained within them, nonetheless, each one will have some degree of truth as well. Further, even the perspective with the greatest degree of truth will be limited as a singular perspective that is not the whole truth on this subject. Irrespective of how we feel about this act, we must admit that nearly each possible perspective contains at least some aspect of the truth, irrespective of being possibly mixed with untruth as well. But the whole truth can be discovered only if we could collect and collate all possible views – a task that is impossible for ordinary individuals.

This state of co-existing, multiple possible views applies to all individuals, every entity we encounter, and to each situation we face in life. For every perspective of the truth believed by an individual or a group, there exists a different one believed by others on the same subject. And, all of the views, or one, or none of those at all, may be untrue. Every situation and every entity have multi-faceted realism, and normal people can perceive just one or only a few of those perspectives. When we understand that each of the multiple perspectives of an entity is one's personalized view of that entity and not the whole truth, only then we can reconcile or reach a compromise. This concept is known as *Anekāntavāda* in Jain tradition.

Anekāntavāda

Anekāntavāda[4,5], which literally means "non-one-sidedness" is composed of three words: *aneka* which means "non-one" or "nonsingular," *anta* which means "end," "termination" or "conclusion," and *vāda* which connotes "-ness." Thus, Anekāntavāda denotes "end of one-sidedness", or simply "non-one-sidedness." Anekāntavāda has also been interpreted as "non-absolutism," "non-one-perspective-ism," "nonsingular conclusivity," "multiplicity of views," and other similar terms.

The doctrine of non-absolutism—the term used for Anekāntavāda in this article—emanates from one of the most profound teachings of Lord Mahāvīra.[6] The term "non-absolutism" does not

entail non-existence of the absolute truth, but to the fact that any single form of the truth perceived by an individual does not represent the absolute truth. Lord Mahāvīra explains that reality (*tattva*)[7] entails creation, destruction and permanence in the context of the universe, nature and life. That means that all entities are entrapped in the cycle of creation and destruction while permanently retaining their inherent characteristics and eternal existence. He elucidated[8]:

> *There exist multiple thoughts about an entity, and many times, they appear to be contradicting each other. But in actuality, they can have both harmony and disharmony at the same time. He who perceives this clearly is the real knower of the true reality.*

Through this belief, Lord Mahāvīra, while expounding his own teachings, showed respect for other diverse views and ideologies about truth and reality. This doctrine of co-existing multiple thoughts is unique to the Jain philosophy. It became the foundation of the doctrine of Anekāntavāda.

Anekāntavāda is central to the overall practice of the Jain tradition. One can surmise that by showing appreciation and having genuine respect for multiplicity of views, Anekāntavāda inherently enables a systematic process for the development, and incorporation in lifestyle, of virtuous traits such as nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), tolerance, compassion, friendship, empathy, ego-lessness, mutual cooperation—and of course honesty and truthfulness—etc., that are essential for honorable living as propounded by Lord Mahāvīra.[9]

Many times, Anekāntavāda is misinterpreted as relativism – a term that does not apply to the profundity of Anekāntavāda. Relativism conveys a conditional view of a truth, for example, a truth perceived by one based on, or related to, the factors such as place, time, one's state of mind, and so on, and an apparent lack of a universal standard of "truth" or "untruth" that can apply (at least to some degree) for all situations. Anekāntavāda, on the other hand, is an acceptance of the possibility of the existence of some degree of truth contained within multiple perspectives, each of which may nor may not have same degree of validity. It also allows that in some situations a perspective might have a great degree of truth, but from another perspective, in another context, that same statement may or may not have the same degree of veracity—even while being held up to the same universalizable standard.

In general, we all have built-in co-existing traits of positivity and negativity, and when we recognize this contradiction, the degrees of separation between them, and the possibility of coherent admixture of contrasts and contradictions, we have started to understand the concept of Anekāntavāda. This recognition drives our vision to be holistic and not singular, our perspective scope to be increasingly broadened to envision the totality of reality at both micro and macro levels, and our knowledge to be synthesized with expressed and unexpressed variations of perspectives.

Understanding the concepts of non-absolutism is not sufficient by itself, its application in real-life situations warrants one's ability to appropriately express in language that which is observed by oneself. One has to be able to articulate the multifaceted reality to communicate. And, Jain

thinkers have been very clear about the limitations of languages knowing that even the omniscient is constrained to express in words the numerous-faceted reality (see Syādvāda, below). A simple example would be a statement like, "I love America." We all know that making such a statement is easy, but fully explaining it in words from all possible perspectives such as why, how, in what sense, and so on, is not feasible. Further, there is something about emotions such as "love" itself that is very real, yet cannot be adequately expressed in words.

To address this predicament, Jain thinkers, centuries ago, formulated two methodologies: *Nayavāda* to comprehend the truth, and *Syadvāda* to faithfully express the observed reality within the realm of Anekāntavāda.

Nayavāda

The endeavor to comprehend an entity from a particular viewpoint is called *naya*, and the system of understanding the entity's reality while allowing for some degree of validity from multiple viewpoints is called Nayavāda[10]. It entails unveiling the reality one part, or one "viewpoint" (*naya*) at a time. The practice of *naya* is designed to extract the basis of truth from scores of viewpoints by investigating those views with an a priori assumption of some degree of validity charitably extended to each one. By this, contrast doesn't require the dismissal of one or the other contrasting claims; rather it demands the practitioner to adjust one's perspective to see the truth in even seemingly contradictory claims. This helps in objectively discovering the sources of conflicts in seemingly mutually contradictory viewpoints – some of which could be contrasting rather than being truly contradictory – without denouncing the validity of any one of multiple possible perspectives. Empowered with this multifaceted knowledge, one can formulate a common ground out of the multiple different views. Using the example cited above regarding kneeling during the playing of the national anthem, we could start by deciphering the first statement in the following manner:

> Colin Kaepernick is an African American football player.
>
> In September 2016, he started the practice of kneeling during the playing of the national anthem of America at the start of the football games.
>
> He has said that the purpose of this protest was to bring to light the topics regarding police brutality and oppression of people of color in America.
>
> He has said that the purpose of this protest was not to disrespect the military personnel or the nation at all.

One could add more items to this list, and in a similar manner, create multiple lists of thoughts behind each of the other contrasting and/or contradictory positions on this subject. We might find that "respectful" or "disrespectful" are not the only options, and the propositions are not

restricted to the "either/or" disjunction. In some ways, the action could be respectful (for example if we define the merit of an action in terms of intention), while in other ways it could be disrespectful (for example, if we focus only on the perception of the action on the part of a select group of people). In the context of this example, "respectability" or "non-respectability" of an action is not an either/or proposition that requires the acceptance of one, and the rejection of the other – they can co-exist in some degrees from a holistic perspective.

While with abstract systems of thoughts like mathematics there may be only one right answer, the dynamics of real-life perspectives are more complex. This type of complexity applies to every situation in life, and everyone we meet. One must keep in mind that every instance could have numerous properties, each of which in turn, could have multiple characteristics, causing the lists to become extremely large very quickly. Irrespective of the numbers of expressions, these steps are essential for an exhaustive quest to discover the whole truth. Even a modern-day super-computer may become inadequate in the quest to account for all perspectives and a strictly quantifiable assessment of exact degrees of truthfulness to a position. Nonetheless, all perspectives in the dynamic situations of life have degrees of veracity on the one hand, but not the same degree on the other. Both are accounted for in the system of Nayavāda.

Syādvāda

Having discovered multiple views of truth pertaining an entity piece by piece, one needs to comprehensively frame it in a language to express it appropriately. Syādvāda [11,12] provides the methodology for structuring such expressions. The word *syād* means "perhaps," "probably" or "maybe." Based on this definition of the word *syād*, one should not conclude that Syādvāda is the doctrine of confusion or uncertainty. To the contrary, it defines an elegant structural scheme for qualified or conditional assertion to express uncertainty and incompleteness in one's understanding of a truth. In a way, Syādvāda could be considered a scheme that could express that which is implied in Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty in quantum mechanics, in the sense that the more one is certain about one aspect from one viewpoint, the more one is uncertain about some other factor(s).

Syādvāda is a scheme to express multi-faceted one-sidedness of one's assertion of truth as perceived by one within the realm of non-absolutism or non-one-sidedness. It is a flawless, collaborative scheme motivated by nonviolence to express Anekāntavāda. Syādvāda defines a structured way to present contrarian views in a harmonized fashion rather than escaping from and discarding the contrarian views.

Continuing with the above example of kneeling during the playing of the national anthem, based on the three expressions listed, one could state:

> Colin Kaepernick, an African American football player, started from September 2016, to kneel during the playing of the national anthem of America at the start of the football games to bring to light the topics regarding police brutality and oppression of people of color in America. He claims that he is not doing this to disrespect the military personnel

or the nation. Some people think it is an act displaying "the beauty of America," while some others believe such protests are against the country and not against racism – one, or a few or all of the expressed views describing the reasons or effects of "the act of kneeling' may or may not be true.

One arrives at such expressions based on seven-part truth values that define a comprehensive methodology for configuring any statement of truth(s). Known as *sapta-bhaṅgī* (see references 11 and 12), the methodology comprises expressions of (1) affirmation, (2) denial, (3) concurrent affirmation and denial, (4) affirmation and inexpressibility, (5) denial and inexpressibility, (6) concurrent affirmation, denial and inexpressibility, and (7) inexpressibility.

The brilliance of this formulation is that it allows for every perspective to have some degree of truth, and for that truth to possibly not be quantifiable in strict terms (that is, "inexpressible"). Furthermore, the methodology allows degrees of veracity in different expressions, and contrasting or contradictory statements do not require the rejection of contrarian or contrasting views. In the end, Syādvāda leaves it to the readers to draw and validate their conclusions, but to also aspire towards a more complex understanding of truth from every possible perspective.

In principle, Syādvāda is systematic application of the concept of Anekāntavāda for expression of truth within the framework and guidelines of Nayavāda. Once one accepts Anekāntavāda, they also subscribe to the theory of Syādvāda; that is, that each entity is a conglomerate of innumerable properties, each having its own viewpoint and some of which may appear to be contrasting or contradictory. No single definition can adequately describe an entity's complexity, and Syādvāda provides a comprehensive and appropriate framework to that end.

Some Examples of Anekāntavāda in Day-to-Day Life

Achieving Harmony between Different Ideologies: There are scores of philosophies, doctrines and beliefs – based on different faiths or otherwise – and the proponents of each of them consider theirs to be the only one that reveals the absolute truth. They may be true to some extent from their own one-sided perception, but their insistence on their singular perspective as the only complete one—at the expense of one or many other perspectives—renders it non-holistic (which itself doesn't make it "untrue"). Under such circumstances, Anekāntavāda and the teachings of Mahāvīra provide the vehicle to promote harmonious co-existence of these varying thoughts.

Religious and Social Tolerance – Pluralism: All religious and spiritual faiths, in their own ways, promote honorable living and eradication of the sinister traits such as anger, greed, ego, deceit and malice. In fact, even those who do not wish to follow any organized faith, strive for the same auspicious goals. Lord Mahāvīra, as discussed before, elucidated the path for peaceful coexistence of all faiths even when they have their own unique, and sometimes contradictory, approaches for achieving honorable living. Anekāntavāda, with its

positive assessment of the fact and value of diversity, empowers mutually amicable co-existence with peace and nonviolence. The recognition of, belief in and respect for diversity is the basis of the modern-day concept of pluralism. Thus, the Jain tradition, with a firm commitment to the principles of Anekāntavāda, inherently promotes pluralism.

Governance and Politics: Nations around the world are governed with differing ideologies such as democracy, socialism, autocracy, sectarian, non-sectarian, communism, and so on. The advocates of each of these ideologies believe theirs to be the best. However, since none of those has proved to be the absolute best for all the nations, they must find ways to co-exist without infringing on each other. Anekāntavāda provides a structure for peaceful co-existence while accepting their mutual differences.

Furthermore, for nations with democratic political systems, there may be multiple political parties with differing ideologies – for example, the Republican and Democratic parties in the US. In addition, multiple ideologies may exist within the parties themselves. In such cases, for optimum governance, it would be great if each political party adheres to the principles of Anekāntavāda and shows respect and understanding of the opposing views on various matters facing the nations.

Social and Family Relations: Anekāntavāda is the ideal platform to bring peace to social or family turmoil caused by diverging views on various issues. When different people learn to be accepting and respectful of their differences, they can work together to uncover the common ground to reconcile, resolve their differences or formulate solutions that work for all of them.

In summary, one can envision innumerable real-life scenarios where Anekāntavāda can be applied to mitigate conflicts and disagreements, and to configure amicable solutions for peaceful co-existence. The doctrine of Anekāntavāda along with its corollary doctrines of Nayavāda and Syādvāda naturally promotes a lifestyle that is driven by nonviolence and other honorable traits. With the pre-disposition that no single expression can ascertain the absolute truth, and an inherent respect for all different forms of truths, Anekāntavāda offers the best mechanism for harmonious non-confrontational co-existence of multiple differing ideologies and perceptions. It naturally inspires nonviolence while offering the most honorable and effective path of reconciliation by structuring interactions that are predicated on non-exclusivity. The world may be recognizing the virtues of pluralism now, Jains have lived it for millennia
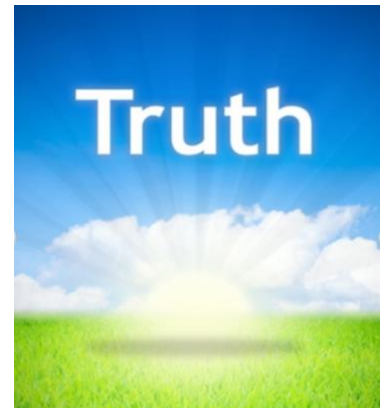
With all the violence caused by inflexible attitudes, relentless untruthfulness, and rigid adherence to one-sided views with complete disregard for the opposing views irrespective of their merits, the Jain doctrine of Anekāntavāda offers a redemptive path for peaceful coexistence of multiple differing views and ideologies. It allows for Jains, and all others, to search for, and discover, truth in a way that is compassionate and caring, yet is complex and logically sound.

[1] On the Art of Deception: How to Lie while Saying the Truth by Jocelyne Vincent and Cristiano Castelfranchi, (https://www.academia.edu/531423/On_the_art_of_deception_How_to_lie_while_saying_the_truth)

[2] Jocelyne Vincent Marelli, *Truthfulness*, *Handbook of Pragmatics* by Jan-Ola bstman & JefVerschueren in collaboration with Eline Versluys, 2006, John Benjamins Publishing Co, Amsterdam/Philadelphia (https://www.academia.edu/531430/Truthfulness_in_Handbook_of_Pragmatics_2006_)

[3] Peter Flugal, Truthfulness and Truth in Jaina Philosophy. Web: (https://www.academia.edu/6691810/Truthfulness_and_Truth_in_Jaina_Philosophy?email_work_card=title)

[4] Parveen Jain, *An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*, Chap 7. Pp. 121-126, 2019, DK Printworld

[5] Samani Chartitrapragya, *Mahāvīra, Anekāntavāda and the World Today*, Transactions – *Ahimsā, Anekāntavāda and Jainism*, Tara Sethia, 2004, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, India.

[6] Acharya Mahaprajna, *Anekanta The Third Eye*, 2002, Jain Vishwa Bharati Institute, Ladnu, Rajasthan, India.

[7] Parveen Jain, *An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*, Chap. 6, 2019, DK Printworld

[8] Ibid. page 122.

[9] Ibid. chap. 12 & 13.

[10] Ibid. Chap 7. Pages 115-121

[11] Ibid. Chap 7. Pages 126-130

[12] Prof. Sagarmal Jain, *Anekantvad, Syadvad and Saptabhangi – A Contemplation*, 1990, Parshwanath Vidyashram Shodh Sansthan, Varanasi, UP, India.