

Jaina Syadvada: The theory that every judgement is relative

The Jainas point out that the different kinds of immediate and mediate knowledge that we possess about objects show that every object has innumerable characters.

An omniscient being can obtain (through kevalajñāna) an immediate knowledge of an object in all its innumerable aspects. But imperfect beings look at objects from one particular point of view at a time and have consequently the knowledge of only one aspect or character of the thing. Such partial knowledge about one of the innumerable aspects of an object is called by the Jaina writers 'naya'.

Judgment (parāmarśa) based on such partial knowledge is also called a 'naya'.

Every judgment that we pass in daily life about any object is, therefore, true only in reference to the standpoint occupied and the aspect of the object considered. It is because we forget this limitation and regard our judgments as unconditionally true, that we come to quarrel and disagree very often in life. The story of the blind men who formed their ideas of an elephant by touching its legs, ears, tail and trunk respectively and thus came to quarrel about the real shape of the animal, illustrates this truth. They quarrelled because each thought that his knowledge was the only true and complete knowledge and should be accepted unconditionally. The quarrel was over as soon as each of them realised that his knowledge was only of one of the many parts of the animal.

The various systems of philosophy which give different accounts of the universe similarly occupy different points of view and discover the different aspects of the many-sided universe. They quarrel because they do not bear in mind that each account is true only from its own standpoint, and is subject to certain conditions. They fail to realise, therefore, that the different views may be true like the different descriptions of the elephant.

In view of these facts, the Jainas insist that every judgment (naya) should be qualified by some word like 'somehow' (syāt, i.e., in some respect), so that the limitation of this judgment and the possibility of other alternative judgments from other points of view may be always clearly borne in mind. For example, instead of a judgment like 'The elephant is like a pillar', it should be said, to remove the chance of confusion, 'Somehow (i.e., in respect of its legs, the elephant is like a pillar)'. Similarly, on perceiving a black earthen jug existing in a room at a particular time, we should not assert unconditionally, 'The jug exists', but should rather say, 'Somehow, the jug exists', which would remind us that the judgment is true only with regard to the many conditions of space, time, quality, etc., under which the jug exists. The qualified judgment 'Somehow, the jug exists' (syād ghaṭaḥ asti) would prevent the possibility of the misapprehension that the pot exists at all times or in every place, or that a pot of any other colour, shape, etc., exists. The unqualified judgment, 'The jug exists', leaves the

possibility of such misapprehension.

The theory of the Jainas has come to be known as syādvāda. It is the view that every ordinary judgment (passed by imperfect minds like ours) holds good only of the particular aspect of the object judged and of the point of view from which the judgment is passed.

This Jaina view is quite in keeping with the view accepted by Western logicians generally, namely, that every judgment is passed in a particular universe of discourse or context and must be understood only in reference thereto. The universe of discourse is constituted by different factors like space, time, degree, quality, etc., which are left unmentioned partly because they are obvious and partly because they are too many to be stated exhaustively. Now, if these conditions cannot be exhaustively enumerated, as some modern logicians like Schiller also admit, it is good for the sake of precision to qualify the judgment explicitly by a word like 'somehow' (syāt).

The principle underlying 'syādvāda' makes Jaina thinkers catholic in their outlook. They entertain and accept the views of other philosophers as different