

Relativism and Representation: Language in Jaina Metaphysics

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Jain theory of language as both a cognitive tool and a physical phenomenon, examining how Jain philosophers address the limitations and relativistic nature of verbal expressions. The analysis begins with the Jain distinction between *śabda* (sound or denotation) and *pada* (word), which provides insight into how language functions on multiple levels. According to Jain thought, *śabda* is a material product of physical processes, yet it holds the capacity to convey meaning—a cognitive quality associated with *jīva*, the self-conscious soul. In contrast, *pada* (a word) derives its meaning only within the structure of a sentence, relying on syntactic context. This distinction highlights the Jain view of language as both a material and cognitive medium, reflecting the dual aspects of reality itself. The paper proceeds to examine the role of language in the Jain concept of reality, which asserts that substances possess infinite qualities, many of which remain beyond the expressive capacity of language. This emphasis on the limitations of language aligns with the Jain doctrine of *Syādvāda* (conditional predication), a theory that posits all statements about reality are conditionally true, relative to specific perspectives and contexts. By dissecting the *Syādvāda* framework, the paper argues that the Jain philosophy does not aim to offer a single, definitive description of reality but instead encourages a multiplicity of perspectives, each of which captures only a fragment of the whole. Following this relativistic approach, the analysis explores how Jain thinkers address the tension between describability and indescribability, particularly in cases where language fails to represent certain qualities of a substance. Here the concept of *avaktavya* (the indescribable) becomes central, representing qualities that transcend verbal expression and can only be apprehended by the *kevalī* (the universal knower) through direct experience. This position emphasizes that while language is an invaluable tool for conveying aspects of reality, it remains inherently limited, with certain aspects of existence lying beyond human cognition and expression. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of this linguistic relativism for Jain metaphysics, suggesting that the Jain approach to language serves not only as a means of expression but also as a method for cultivating cognitive humility. By acknowledging that language provides only a partial view of reality, the Jain theory of language underlines the necessity of multiple perspectives and the acceptance of uncertainty as fundamental to understanding reality. This perspective highlights the Jain commitment to non-absolutism in epistemology, illustrating how the limitations of language inform a broader ethical and philosophical stance.

Keywords: Language, Jain Philosophy, Syādvāda, Reality, Pluralism.

The Challenge of Articulating Reality through Language

The Jain philosophy emphasises a multifaceted view of reality, one that acknowledges the inherent limitations of language in fully capturing the essential nature of substances. At the heart of this perspective is the Jain distinction between *śabda*, the material sound of language, and *pada*, the semantic unit or word, which together constitute the expressive capacity of language. The Jains regard verbal expressions as material instruments (*paudgalika*) for verbal cognition or meaning, which constitutes awareness. Both represent alterations of the substance's properties. The former pertains to the quality of substance, whereas the latter relates to the quality of self-consciousness (*jīva*). Therefore, the *śabda* can be comprehended as both substance and quality. They differentiate between *śabda* and word (*pada*). A *śabda* does not necessitate a sentence for meaning, whereas a word (*pada*), being a component of a sentence, requires a sentence for its interpretation; for instance, the *pada* 'gam', referring to the cow in the phrase "herd the

cows in" (*gam abhyāja*). A *pada* is employed in a sentence with case endings, whereas a *śabda*, when utilised in a sentence, constitutes a *pada*. Therefore, it requires a sentence for the fulfilment of its meaning, whereas *śabda* (*gauh*) conveys the meaning "cow" regardless of its contextual usage. *Sabda* serves as the denotation (*vacaka*) of the entity (*vastu*) it signifies (*vācya*). The characteristic of *śabda* is to signify significance. *Sabda* is defined as that which inherently signifies a meaning (*vastu*). Verbal sounds are generated by the interaction of air molecules; the vibrations occur through the exertion of human vocal apparatus and propagate outward. A sentence is an autonomous arrangement of words that together convey a specific meaning. The Jains emphasize

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that substances possess an infinite array of attributes and qualities, only a limited subset of which can be expressed through language. Language, therefore, is seen as an inherently limited medium, capable of capturing only particular aspects of a substance's nature. The Jain distinction between śabda and pada highlights language's dual nature as both a material and cognitive phenomenon. This perspective reflects the Jain view of reality as composed of substances (dravya) with infinite qualities (guṇa), many of which defy verbal representation. As such, the Jains maintain that language can only capture a limited aspect of the true nature of reality. This tension between the expressible and the inexpressible is central to Jain metaphysics and epistemology, as exemplified by the concept of Syādvāda, or the theory of conditioned predication.¹

The Jaina philosophy posits that the essence of language lies in the comprehension of meaning, asserting that only self-aware individuals possess the capacity for verbal cognition. Verbal expressions and scripts serve as tangible indicators; however, the cognitive processes they evoke lead to awareness, which lies at the core of understanding meaning. Language serves merely as an instrument employed by self-aware individuals to grasp the essence of meaning. The Jainas, in contrast to the Bauddhas, acknowledge the vicaka-vacya relationship; however, they reject any fixed association, whether it be one of identity or causation, between the denotation (śabda) and its denotative meaning (vācyārtha). Regarding the significance of language, they, akin to conventionalists, acknowledge that the meaning of a word is determined by its usage.

Jain Relativism: Pluralistic Reality and Conditional Knowledge

It is commonly understood among scholars that Jainism, as a system of spiritual practice, centres its discourse on the metaphysical description of reality as its primary concern. The metaphysical framework of Jainism is characterised by a form of realistic pluralism known as Anekāntavāda. This perspective acknowledges the existence of countless independent entities, encompassing both atoms of matter and souls, which are primarily classified into six distinct categories of substances. According to the definitions:

- i. an entity encompasses infinite qualities (ananta dharmātkam vastu²), and

- ii. reality is characterised by a multitude of qualities - both positive (dhrauvya) and negative (utpāda and vyaya).

The essence is simultaneously enduring and in flux (utapada vyaya dhrauvya samyuktam sat³). From the previous perspective, the latter appears to be illusory, and conversely. Satta, as understood by the Jainas, represents a quality of substance that is contingent upon the latter's existence. Substance possesses an inherent nature; it exists autonomously, relying on nothing external. It does not exist as a standalone quality; rather, countless attributes, including saltā (being), rely upon it. Satta, as the fundamental quality inherent in all substances, is regarded as synonymous with substance itself. While there may be some distinctions, for the sake of this discourse on the Jaina perspective, terms such as things, objects, satta, substance, and reality are employed interchangeably.

The Jaina philosophy embraces a relativistic perspective, acknowledging that even a singular reality encompasses countless enduring qualities and mutable modifications, while recognising our constrained means of understanding. Understanding is contingent upon the substance, form, spatial dimensions, temporal aspects, and contextual framework of the subject matter. The comprehension of the countless attributes of any reality in its totality is unattainable; our understanding is limited to a singular quality, which is experienced by a particular individual and, furthermore, is shaped by specific forms, temporal conditions, spatial dimensions, and contextual factors. A universal knower possesses the ability to perceive and comprehend reality in its totality; however, he faces challenges in conveying this knowledge to individuals who lack the capacity to grasp the entirety or even a singular aspect of a substance at once, namely, those who do not share the same level of understanding. In summary, their metaphysical stance fundamentally results in an experience of reality itself that is attainable at the level of a universal knower, which ultimately hinges on faith.

One might enquire: what is the role of a philosopher within a framework that acknowledges each of the infinite objects as possessing boundless qualities, while each of these qualities is subject to infinite variations? Furthermore, how does one reconcile this with the notion that the knowledge of any individual knower is limited to a particular form, time, space, and context in which the substance exists? The role of philosophers is to

¹ padānām punvākyartha pratayane vidheye 'nyonya nimittopakāramanusāratam vākyantarastha padāpekṣā rahitā samhatih vākyabhidhīyatei-Syadvādaratnākara, Vāsudevasūri, ed. Motilal Laghaji, 1996, Bhāvanā Petha, Poona, Samvat 2054, p. 941.

² Śaddarśanasamuccaya, Gunaratna, p. 211. See also, Nyāyāvatāra, Siddhasena, p. 29.

³ Tattvārthādhigamasūtra, Umāswātī, 5.29.

integrate various viewpoints and evidences (nayas and pramaṇas) concerning the object and its attributes, with a clear intention that philosophy serves as a tool to render the infinite comprehensible through the amalgamation of distinct sources of knowledge pertaining to different facets of the object. One could further interpret their theory of alternative standpoints as suggesting that each alternative possesses its own inherent positivity, while the negative aspect of a positive alternative serves as the negation of another alternative. Each of the alternatives stands in opposition to the others, thereby presenting the philosophers with the challenge of navigating between these divergent options. However, that approach serves to diminish the essential work of a philosopher. Nevertheless, the Jainas reject the notion of alternatives as exclusion, as their objective is to demonstrate that the perfect substance can be comprehended as the unity of differing alternatives.

The Jaina philosophers regard the concepts of word and sentence as contingent and context-dependent. Both hold equal significance and efficacy in the understanding of sentential meaning. In the realm of verbal cognition, one cannot overlook the importance attributed to the word by the Abhihitānvayavādins, nor can the significance of the sentence, as posited by the Anvitābhīdhānavādins, be dismissed. Consequently, both theories—"expression proceeds relation" and "relation proceeds expression"—are subject to critique (Prabhachandra 1941: 551-61). In this framework, it is essential to elucidate the methods employed by philosophers in their pursuit of understanding. What do they articulate regarding the capacity to describe reality more clearly? Is it beyond description in its entirety?

The Structure of Reality: Syādvāda and the Nature of Substance

The Jainas assert that a substance loses its essence when it is detached from the infinite qualities. The substance allows for various qualities to emerge, each contingent upon distinct expectancies. From that perspective, Jainas embody a form of relativistic pluralism, positing that our understanding of any given phenomenon is contingent upon our particular viewpoint. This understanding is inherently limited, and to regard such limited knowledge as definitive is fundamentally erroneous.¹

How might one articulate a reality that encompasses positive, negative, and even contradictory qualities, as well as those that are transcendental or elude

verbal expression entirely? Contrary to the prevailing views articulated at the outset of this discourse, addressing these enquiries occupies a philosophically pivotal position for the Jainas. Their framework includes a theory of sevenfold judgement (saptabhangi-naya) that aligns seamlessly with their conceptualisation of substance, defined as that which embodies qualities and modes, alongside the metaphysical premise of anantadharmātkam vastu, utpātavyayadhrauvyasanyuktam sat, as well as their epistemological perspective of Syādvāda.²

The Sevenfold Scheme: Understanding Conditional Perspectives

Let us advance with their sevenfold judgements, the details of which are presented as follows.³

- i. Syādasti (in a relative sense, a thing possesses reality): The judgement illustrates the precedence of the substantive over the modification, highlighting the latter's secondary status.
- ii. Syānnāsti (in a comparative sense, an entity is not real): The dominance of alteration that subjugates the substantive is illustrated.
- iii. Syadastināsti ca (in a relative sense, a phenomenon can be both real and unreal): The significance of both the substantive and the modification is emphasised.
- iv. Syadvaktavyam (in a comparative sense, a thing eludes precise description). The relationship between the substantive and the modification is elucidated.
- v. Syadastya ca avyaktavyam (in a relative sense, an entity possesses reality yet remains beyond description). The matter, when viewed through the lens of the primacy of both the specific substantive and specific modification, is identified as existence, while from the perspective of the universal substantive and universal modification, it is described as "indescribable".
- vi. Syannastyavaktavyam (relatively, a thing is unreal and is indescribable): This perspective articulates that from the anticipation of change, the essence is deemed unreal, and from the dual expectation of the real and the unreal coexisting, a thing is characterised as both unreal and indescribable.
- vii. Syadastināstyavaktavyam: A thing can be perceived as real when considered from the perspective of substance, as unreal when viewed through the lens of modification, and as indescribable when approached from the standpoint of simultaneously being both real and unreal.

¹ anantadharmātmakamevatattvamato 'nyatha 'sattvamasūpapādam Syadvādamañjarī, Mallisena, Gāthā 22, p. 267, Bombay, 1935.

² Gūṇaparyayavad dravyam, tattvārthasūtra - Viśeṣāvaśyakabhāṣya on Syadvādamañjarī, p. 37, ed. Jagadish Jain, Srimad Rajachandra Asram, Agas.

³ Syadvādamañjarī, pp. 166-70, see also, Viśeṣāvaśyakabhāṣya, p. 895.

Within this framework, various viewpoints hold distinct significance; they are integrated through the theory of Syādvāda. Thus, when considering the expectancy of substance, one arrives at a singular understanding; however, from the perspectives of knowledge (jīta) and vision (darśana), one encounters a duality. Furthermore, when approached from the standpoint of an expectancy that diverges from the previous interpretations, it becomes an entity that eludes precise description. Let us examine these judgements with a critical lens. The initial judgement of the three is grounded in our perception of entities as either existent, non-existent, or a combination of both existent and non-existent. In the final four judgements, the term *avaktavyam* is employed, signifying indescribability. The term "indescribable" holds considerable importance for the current discourse. In contrast to A.J. Ayer, who asserts that the statement "the pot exists" is validated through a corresponding experience, the Jainas' philosophical framework presents a markedly different perspective. In contrast to empiricists, Jainas adopt a more realistic perspective. There exists a substance, "the pot that exists," which permeates the established knowledge that "the pot exists," and a similar relationship holds true for that which does not exist. Only existence and non-existence are the concepts that are recognised and articulated in this manner. An object may possess qualities that are beyond description, and on that foundation, it can indeed be articulated in such a manner. The essence of an entity does not inherently possess the capacity to infuse its ineffable characteristics that render it recognisable in that manner. What is the meaning of the term "indescribable"? The inquiry pertains directly to the significance of language.

Language as Representation: Navigating Reference and Reality in Jain Thought

The Jainas, as I perceive them, regard language not merely as a tool for reference but rather as a means of representation. It serves as a reference, indicating or alluding to the intended object, which exists independently of the language itself. The relationship between the two is one of reference and referent. They acknowledge the superiority of the referent as an entity in its own right. Nonetheless, this relationship does not facilitate an understanding of the ineffable, which cannot be adequately articulated. Should we concede this point, it follows that language serves as a representation of objects; that which is beyond description, therefore, cannot be adequately represented. In this context, the Jainas appear to hold a valid perspective when they assert that certain qualities inherent in objects exist outside the realm of representation and reference, transcending the boundaries of description. Describability is contingent upon one's perspective; however, if we label the countless positions of an entity, of which we possess

no relative understanding, as indescribable, it prompts the inquiry: does indescribable equate to the absolute? Jainism might articulate the concept of "indescribability" from a relativistic perspective as well. However, their employment of the indescribability of reality serves to underscore the entirety of reality as the absolute, which is the subject of a universal knower.

Describability and the Limits of Knowledge

Given that the essence of untainted and boundless knowledge is obscured by the influence of karma in the material realm, Jainas categorise the entirety of knowledge into five distinct types, as follows:

- i. *Mati* (ordinary knowledge): The understanding derived from sensory perception and cognitive processes is referred to as *mati-jīāna*. It encompasses external perception, introspection, memory, intuition, inference, imagination, and more;
- ii. *Śruti* (testimony): The knowledge of *Śruti* that serves as the subject of discourse. Not all of the *mati-jīāna* is encompassed within it; rather, only a portion of the knowledge derived from the teachings of genuine individuals, *siddhas*, *līrthamkaras*, and pertinent texts constitutes the focus of *śruti-jīāna*. This understanding is grounded in *mati-jīāna*. The fundamental distinction between the two lies in the absence of verbal expression in *mati-jīāna*, whereas *śruti-jīāna* is characterised by knowledge conveyed through language.
- iii. *Avadhi*: In a state akin to trance or hypnotism;
- iv. *Manah paryaya*: Immediate comprehension of the thoughts residing within other minds; and
- v. *Kevali*: An exhaustive understanding of all substances as they exist in their intrinsic nature. They categorise the objects of knowledge into two types:

- i. The object of knowledge as perceived by an ordinary knower, which, while remaining constant in essence, undergoes transformation.
- ii. The essence of knowledge as perceived by a universal knower; at this juncture, the soul is recognised as identical in both substance and qualities, remaining unaltered.

Certain entities within the realm of experience (*mati-jīāna*) serve as subjects for articulation and elucidation. From a descriptive standpoint, there are two categories of existence: (i) that which is amenable to description, and (ii) that which eludes description. Within a singular substance, one can discern qualities that are both articulable and those that elude description. All knowledge conveyed through language is *śruti-jīāna*, while *śruti-jīāna* represents the relative understanding that is communicated via linguistic expression. An expressed meaning (*Dacya*) serves as the object of *śruti-jīāna*, while an indescribable aspect (*avācyā*) pertains to the realm of

experience (mati-jīana), which eludes description due to the constraints of language. While it may pertain to kevala-jīāna, in both instances, language proves inadequate in conveying the essence of the object. This serves as an additional rationale for employing the term avicya. Even all that is encompassed within vicya remains incommunicable through language. The aspect of meaning (vacya) that is conveyed through words (vacaka) is only expressed, whereas avācyā refers to that which remains incommunicable. What, then, is the significance of the term avacya?

The Jainas, akin to the Naiyāyikas, recognise meaning as a universal concept, nuanced by the particular (Jain 1941: 568). However, the ineffable, existing beyond the realm of śruti-jīāna, cannot be aptly designated as a meaning. Within their metaphysical framework, substances and their qualities serve as the focus of mati-jīana; however, they may elude the grasp of śruti-jīāna, leading to the designation of "indescribable". In a precise manner, the term "indescribable" can be understood in the following context (Padmarajah 1963: 34-35) within their framework of relative describability:

- i. Simultaneous articulation regarding the real, the unreal, and the indescribable is unattainable.
- ii. The simultaneous articulation of concepts as real, unreal, a combination of both, and their negation concurrently is not feasible.
- iii. The essence, by its very nature, eludes description; it may be encountered as an object of mati-jīāna, yet it resists articulation as an object of śruti-jīāna.
- iv. To acknowledge the concurrent existence of the real and the unreal, yet lament the lack of a suitable term for their articulation. For instance, there exists no term that encapsulates the describability of the soul, which is apada (that which eludes verbal description).¹
- v. The language occupies a restricted position and operates within a narrow scope; words fail to encapsulate the entirety of an object's boundless attributes. Consequently, the object is both partially describable and partially indescribable.

The Jaina perspective appears valid in asserting that substance exists independently of our ability to describe it. Describability is contingent upon our understanding through śruti-jīāna, while indescribability pertains to the surpassing of knowledge as articulated by śruti-jīana: However, it is essential to recognise that our understanding is contingent upon the anticipated nature, characteristics, and alterations of the entity that informs that understanding.

In Jaina philosophy, expressiveness (vacyatva) is limited to the representational capacity of language. The

essence of language lies in its quality, wherein the meaning (vācyā) exists independently or in isolation. The language serves as vācaka, while the object (vastu) is identified as vācyā; they assert that the object possesses qualities beyond vācyatva, and there exist additional aspects within a vicya that remain unrepresented by language. In this instance, the aspect of meaning (vacya) exists beyond the confines of language. Among the qualities that transcend ordinary understanding, some can be experienced, yet there exist others that remain beyond the grasp of typical cognition. The limitations of language render it inadequate for conveying even the qualities known by the universal knower. It is indeed a tragedy that even the kevali is unable to articulate his experiences, constrained by the inadequacies of linguistic expression, while the knower is similarly hindered by the boundaries of his comprehension, resulting in an inability to fully grasp these profound truths. Consequently, the ineffable (avācyā) remains beyond description immediately to a typical observer.²

The Jainas present a theory of indescribability to elucidate the circumstance wherein both negative and positive qualities of an object cannot be articulated simultaneously, owing to the limitations of language. Nevertheless, due to that linguistic limitation, it cannot be asserted that the entity is indescribable, as it exists in reality. In summation, Sagar Mal Jain articulates, "the reality independently and in its entirety is avacya, but it is vicya relatively and partially" (1986: 86). It is my perspective that the essence of reality remains fundamentally ineffable, even though certain aspects may be articulated to some extent.

In his paper, Raghunath Ghosh (2003) offers a noteworthy observation while concluding Hemacandra's response to the various objections posed by the adversaries of Syādvāda. He articulates that "an object can be characterised in various manners due to its inherent multifaceted nature". This perspective can be substantiated by the notion that a specific sentence or text can be understood in various manners, influenced by one's cultural background, assumptions, and other factors, provided that the object (sentence or text) allows for such interpretation. Were it not for such a possibility, no individual would have ventured to provide varied interpretations. Thus, the entity inherently possesses a variety of forms, which supports Hemacandra's argument. This paper is dedicated to the analysis of Hemacandra's response to the critiques of Syādvāda and its subsequent assessment. Upon examining the paper, additional expectations concerning the nature of the text emerge (Ghosh 2003: 122). The Jaina theory accommodates a

¹ apayassa payam natthi - Acarāᅅgasūtra 1.5.6

² annavanijjābhāvanantabhāgo du anabhillappāᅇam - Viśeᅇāvaśyakabhāᅇya 141

variety of interpretations; however, since the portion of the text that can be described and interpreted pertains solely to the object of interpretation, a significant portion of the text, particularly the indescribable aspects, eludes description. Once more, within the framework of Jaina representation theory concerning language, it is posited that the myriad qualities that make up reality, along with the reality itself possessing various attributes, cannot be comprehensively understood in a logical manner.

From a philosophical standpoint, the stance of Jainas results in a dichotomous scenario. If that which is indescribable remains so, how can it be articulated using the term that denotes its indescribability? Jainas might assert that the term indescribable (*avācya*) is indeed indescribable (*avācya*) solely because it is known partially through experience and entirely through *sadhana*.

Nevertheless, the latter transcends both categories of knowledge, and a significant portion of the latter remains inexpressible through language, constrained as it is by the limitations inherent to knowledge itself. Philosophers are capable of synthesising judgements that are grounded in relative knowledge and can be articulated. On that foundation, they may suggest the transcendent nature of reality; however, they cannot render the ineffable comprehensible to a knower devoid of language. Even the omniscient being, possessing knowledge of all substances and their qualities, cannot articulate them all at once. The sequential nature of language inherently renders the simultaneous expression of the infinite a cognitive and logical impossibility.

Conclusion: The Role of Language in Jain Metaphysics

The Jaina theory appears to hold validity insofar as it acknowledges Reality as a constant, thereby enabling various extensions of knowledge and assertions to be articulated regarding it. It remains constant despite varying assertions regarding it. Our understanding is limited, and the ultimate reality that eludes our comprehension is the domain of a universal knower's insight. The stance of Jainas suggests our limitations in comprehending the absolute. It emphasises the significance of fostering awareness and comprehensibility to the degree of a universal knower; however, this scarcely enhances the quality of philosophical contemplation, which is solely focused on knowledge derived from expression or mere articulation. If language is material and meaning is cognitive, and if there exists no fixed relationship between language and its meaning, then the latter becomes relative to the use of the former. Consequently, grammar and communication, which rely on the fixed meanings conveyed by language, will struggle to establish a solid and steady foundation. Granting all power to substance does not inherently

necessitate disregarding the intrinsic power of language, which enriches cognition.

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