

UNITED WISDOM

Jainism: Multiple Perspectives and the Limits of an Assertion

World and Consciousness

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Imagine a hypothetical scene. Three people discuss a family's move. One says, “It is a good decision: expenses will fall.” Another answers, “A bad one: we will lose our friends' support.” A third considers the opportunity to study most important. “Good” and “bad” sound directly contradictory. Yet the people may be assessing different properties of one decision. Before deciding who is mistaken, it helps to understand the respect in which each is speaking.

This does not mean everyone is automatically right. The expense calculation may be wrong, friends' support may remain, and studying may be unavailable. But the search for error will be more precise if we first recover the subject of each assertion.

What this article explores. Jain philosophy offers a developed language for reality's many-sidedness, partial perspectives, and qualified assertion. We will examine anekantavada, naya, and syad, see their connection with Jainism's religious world, and distinguish them from the convenient slogan “Every opinion is true.” We will then consider how a contemporary person can mark the limits of an assertion without losing the ability to choose and object. This is philosophical reading, rather than an account of the whole Jain religion; the hypothetical everyday scenes and practical questions belong to our contemporary explanation.

1. Many-Sidedness Concerns the World, Not Only Opinion

Anekantavada means non-one-sidedness, the many-sidedness of what exists. In Marie-Hélène Gorisse's academic account, Jain thinkers are realists: an object has different aspects independently of whether we like that arrangement. A perspective's limits are connected with the subject's own many-sidedness. Gorisse, “Jaina Philosophy,” §3.4.2.

This is a substantial difference from “Everyone has their own truth.” The latter sometimes means only that people say different things and are hard to persuade. The Jain question is stronger: what structure of the subject allows one statement to capture an aspect without exhausting the whole? The difference does not lie exclusively in our moods.

An imagined apartment may be cheap to rent and costly in daily travel. These are not two isolated private universes in which costs depend on the speaker's preferences. Both kinds of expense can be calculated. The apparent contradiction in “cheap” becomes clearer when we specify which costs the assessment includes.

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But many-sidedness does not require assigning an apartment every possible property. If it is in one city, the claim that it is in another does not become true simply because someone says it confidently. An assessment parameter cannot be replaced with a convenient invention of fact.

Here lies the first limit of contemporary application: a perspective needs a subject and grounds. Someone can consider costs, relationships, time, and accessibility. They need not treat every rumor as an additional facet of truth. Multiplicity deserves investigation, rather than the automatic respectful acceptance of every assertion.

Still, it helps to notice how often a dispute arises from an overly general word. “Convenient,” “successful,” “fair,” and “safe” can unite different criteria. Clarification does not weaken a thought. It shows exactly where the thought connects with reality and where its limit begins.

2. Persistence and Change Need Not Exclude Each Other

Tattvartha Sutra V.29 connects existence with origination, disappearance, and persistence. The primary passage read in Gorisse and its explanation distinguish substance from changing modes. One subject can therefore be considered persistent in one respect and changing in another. Umasvati/Umasvamin, V.29, passage in Gorisse, §3.4.2.

An imagined wooden table can introduce the question. It remains the same object after a small scratch, but its surface is no longer as before. “The table persisted” and “The table changed” are compatible if they concern different aspects. Yet this everyday example does not establish the whole Jain ontology. It merely makes the task of explaining persistence together with change intelligible.

Similar language requires even greater caution with a person. An imagined interlocutor says, “You are completely different,” while the other answers, “I am the same.” Perhaps the first notices changed decisions, while the second retains a sense of biographical continuity. They need not choose one sentence and destroy the other. They can clarify what changed in actions and what remained meaningful in their own history.

But we cannot arbitrarily claim someone has changed when their behavior repeats. “He is no longer the same” may be a hope, rather than a description. Particular events, dates, and observations are needed. Conversely, the past cannot be treated as a final sentence: the possibility of change should be checked in the present, without denying earlier consequences.

Our contemporary question thus has two parts: in what respect do we speak of persistence, and on which evidence do we speak of change? It helps avoid both magical hope and an immovable label. We are not turning Jain philosophy into a theory of personal growth; we are using the problem it posed to handle our own words more accurately.

Another question matters in a dispute over persistence: which subject have we singled out? If we mean the table, a scratch changes its condition. If we mean a smooth surface as a particular property, the earlier smoothness has been lost. One event receives different descriptions without the fact itself changing. But we cannot quietly change the subject midway through an argument: first acknowledge a surface's change, then conclude that every table has disappeared.

A more serious difficulty arises when changes accumulate. Imagine all the table's parts being gradually replaced. The everyday scene no longer supplies an indisputable answer about exactly which object persisted. It shows the need for a criterion of identity. A familiar name may remain, but a name alone is insufficient for an ontological proof. The Jain distinction between substance and modes offers a particular answer; contemporary readers may ask how it is justified and to which subjects it applies.

The same limit applies to our discussion of a person. We cannot infer an unchanging soul because an acquaintance retained their name, or refute it because they changed their opinion. Different levels of the question require different grounds. Jain philosophy asserts more than the convenient compatibility of “the same” and “changed.” A hypothetical example is therefore useful for posing the problem: it does not make a selected metaphysical solution self-evident, but shows why the problem really exists.

3. A Partial Perspective Need Not Be an Error

Naya is a partial way of considering a subject. In Jain discussions, it can disclose a real aspect while distorting the picture if it declares that aspect the only existing content. Gorisse describes the doctrine of perspectives as a complex apparatus for analyzing modes of attention and statement. Gorisse, “Jaina Philosophy,” §3.4.4.

A contemporary example is assessing a business through profit. Profit may be accurately calculated and highly significant. But if the question concerns what is happening to the business as a whole, obligations, quality, resilience, and working conditions also require attention. An individual measure is not false because it is incomplete. Error begins with concluding that nothing outside it matters.

An imagined employee says, “The new system is successful: we respond faster.” Another sees that responses have become less accurate. Both may be reporting real results. A question about goals is now needed: what was the system meant to improve, and how can speed be reconciled with accuracy? If we argue only over “successful,” the substantive work remains hidden.

Incompleteness and falsity require different responses. An incomplete report can be supplemented; a false one needs correction. Confusing them leads us either to reject accurate

information because it does not say everything, or to retain inaccurate information as an additional perspective.

There is also a limit to accumulation. Several opinions do not guarantee a complete picture if they rest on one unverified account. Diversity of wording does not yet mean diversity of access to the subject. In an imagined group, five people may repeat the same judgment heard from a sixth. For checking, establishing its origin matters more than counting those who agree.

Such attention to perspective does not turn every conversation into an endless list. It helps us choose the aspects significant for the task. In deciding whether to move, some information changes the choice while other information adds details. A definite goal lets many-sidedness work, rather than turning it into endless gathering of material.

4. Syad Qualifies an Assertion Rather Than Canceling It

Syadvada concerns qualified statement: “in a particular respect,” or “under particular conditions.” We should not read syad as a simple “perhaps” where a specified aspect is meant. In Samantabhadra's Aptamimamsa, verses 14–15, accessible through Gorisse's academic text, positive and negative assertions are qualified by form, place, time, and other relations. Samantabhadra, 14–15, in Gorisse, §3.4.3.

For our imagined family decision, this might sound like “In terms of monthly rent, moving is advantageous; taking travel time into account, the benefit remains unknown.” This is not timid speech from someone afraid to draw a conclusion. The positive assertion is clear enough, and its limit is identified separately.

By contrast, “It is both good and bad” leaves too much obscure. It may be a useful first reaction, but a decision needs clarification. Good in what respect? Bad for whom? Over what period? Does the assessment concern an established consequence or a possible one? Until these parameters are named, the apparent depth of ambiguity performs no work.

Another example: an imagined person says they trust a partner. They may trust the partner's good faith while doubting their ability to meet a deadline. These positions are compatible. Clarification is not a hidden accusation: it allows agreement on additional deadline checks without putting the entire person on trial.

A condition must not, however, become a way to defend any failed forecast retroactively. If someone asserted before an event that “the deadline will definitely be met,” it is insufficient after the failure to announce that they always meant a special perspective. Conditions should be available when the assertion is made. Otherwise, qualification becomes a means of evading responsibility for one's own words.

A good limited statement makes a thought vulnerable to checking precisely within its domain. It does not promise correctness in every possible situation. Its limit is therefore part of its strength, rather than a defect.

5. Seven Forms Do Not Supply Seven Arbitrary Truths

Jain logic develops seven forms of qualified predication, combining affirmation, negation, and inexpressibility in particular respects. Mark Owen Webb's academic account presents both criticism and the possibility of reading these forms through different parameters. Webb, “Jain Philosophy,” §2.

For an introduction, understanding the task matters more than memorizing a list as a universal tool. Even if one word names a subject, our speech still singles out its different aspects successively. The question is how to speak of their combination without presenting an individual statement as an exhaustive description. But the system does not permit uttering a direct contradiction in the same respect and calling it wisdom.

Imagine a promise: “The document has been sent.” At the same time, to the same recipient, and with the same meaning of “sent,” “The document has not been sent” is incompatible with it. The fact needs establishing, rather than the diversity of perspectives celebrating. It is different if the file was sent to one recipient but not another, or sent but not delivered. Then parameters really differ, and the difference must be named.

Inexpressibility should not become a right to stop every check either. Someone may struggle to formulate a complex experience simultaneously. This does not make every factual statement they make inaccessible to clarification. We can respect an account's complexity while separately checking a date, event, or agreement.

The seven forms do not produce an everyday machine that automatically settles disputes. Application still requires understanding the subject, words, and grounds. Simply adding “in some sense” to every sentence will not make information more accurate. Accuracy arises when that sense can be explained and its difference from other senses changes the conclusion.

A reasonable first step, therefore, is not to gather all seven forms around every question but to learn to name at least one genuine parameter of one's assertion.

In Webb's exposition, the seven forms include qualified affirmation, negation, their combination, inexpressibility, and combinations of the last with the first three. Webb, §2. It matters to distinguish a sequence of statements from a wish to fit every aspect into one simultaneously. A successive explanation can disclose parameters that a short sentence cannot retain.

Return to the document. “It exists as a signed copy, but does not exist as a registered document” contains two assertions with different qualifications. Remove the qualifications and we get “It exists and does not exist”; the phrase sounds mysterious, although our abbreviation created the mystery. If the subject is absent even as a signed copy, however, the first part is false. A new perspective cannot save it without new facts.

Inexpressibility in this work is not equivalent to silence about everything. When a complete combination is hard to capture in one statement, individual relations can be explained. But once explanation is available, difficulty of expression can no longer shield us from every question. An imagined person may have a complex attitude toward moving and still report the rent accurately enough.

Many-sidedness thus requires an effort of language: retaining differences that the initial formulation merged. It does not offer an easy release from logic. The broader the assertion, the more work is needed to show how its parts relate to the subject. Sometimes a short, precise answer is more honest than an impressive paradox; sometimes brevity really does hide a significant aspect.

6. Ahimsa and Knowledge: Another Life Exceeds Our Description

Jainism includes teachings about the plurality of jivas, karmic bondage, and liberation, rather than only rules for respectful debate. Ahimsa, non-harming, is central. Monastic great vows differ in scope from householders' limited vows. Jainpedia presents this distinction and the religious context. Jasmine Kelly, “Jain Beliefs,” “Soul,” “Karma,” “Vows”.

We can cautiously compare attention to an assertion's limits with attention to speech's consequences. An imagined interlocutor called someone “irresponsible” after one episode. Perhaps the episode was serious. But turning behavior into an exhaustive label performs an additional action: others are now invited to see the person only through that assessment.

A considerate contemporary formulation might be “In this instance, the promise was not kept; I need a different arrangement for agreements.” It does not remove responsibility. Instead, responsibility receives a particular subject. The person can discuss the promise itself, rather than defend their entire existence against a general sentence.

We cannot, however, declare every unpleasant fact violence and therefore prohibit speaking of it. Concealing an event can also cause harm, particularly if it recurs. Truthfulness and care need not mean pleasant speech. Our contemporary application asks how to name a significant fact without unnecessary humiliation and avoid concealing it in the name of tolerance.

A boundary remains: we are not deriving a general modern communication protocol from Jain ethics or assigning the reader an ascetic life. Religious nonviolence has its own grounds and

practices. Readers can take a question about their assertion's consequences without pretending it exhausts ahimsa or automatically makes them followers of the Jain path.

7. The Jain Tradition Also Has Genuine Disagreements

The main Digambara and Shvetambara traditions differ in their canons, monastic practice, and questions of women's liberation; further branches exist within them. Jainpedia also describes disputes about the use of images in worship. Nalini Balbir, “Sects,” “Digambaras and Śvetāmbaras”.

This matters for our subject. If many-sidedness is interpreted as an absence of any serious disagreement, Jains themselves will not fit the picture we have created. A tradition can acknowledge the complexity of statement while holding particular convictions, criticizing rivals, and differing in its understanding of religious practice.

It does not follow that many-sidedness fails. It follows that it is no guarantee of a conflict-free community. A philosophical apparatus does not cancel historical conditions, institutions, and differences of reading. Every system of thought encounters people who can apply it differently.

An imagined contemporary group may also value different opinions while disagreeing about an important rule. Respect for participants does not automatically determine which rule to adopt. Grounds must be discussed, a decision made, and reconsideration allowed. Sometimes disagreement remains afterward. Its existence does not prove an absence of respect.

We should therefore avoid imposing an unrealistic examination on a tradition: if it speaks of many-sidedness, every adherent must agree with everyone. Agreement and recognition of one's own assertion's limits are different things. We can firmly reject a position that is false in a particular respect while understanding why it arose or which other aspect it tries to defend.

Difficult historical positions must not be softened for our convenience either. Disagreements over women's possibilities require precise identification, rather than turning the entire tradition into a ready modern ideal of equality. Substantive reading includes the uncomfortable part.

8. An Objection: Does Many-Sidedness Make Everything Relative?

Webb formulates a problem of self-application: if every assertion is limited, what is the status of the doctrine of many-sidedness itself? Gorisse, by contrast, emphasizes that Jain specification of parameters serves realist engagement with a subject and does not require accepting direct contradictions. It is useful to preserve this difference between academic readings. Webb, §2; Gorisse, §§3.4.1–4.

For contemporary readers, the objection can be stated simply: if every position has a limit, does that mean no position can be defended? No; having a limit does not deprive a statement of truth under the stated conditions. “The door is open now” need not be true tomorrow in order to report a fact today.

A harder question remains: how do we establish the correctness of these conditions and the sufficiency of a perspective? We cannot simply declare every convenient qualification valid. A factual assertion requires checking; a philosophical assertion requires argument; a religious assertion requires understanding its grounds and context. Many-sidedness does not replace these tasks.

An imagined person justifies a broken promise: “You see only your own side.” Perhaps the other really does not know all the circumstances. But the speaker has not named those circumstances or explained their significance. An appeal to complexity is not a substantive answer. It can become one after clarification: what was impossible, what changed, why was it not communicated, and how are the consequences being addressed?

Openness to perspectives must therefore work alongside a demand for grounds. If it prohibits questions, the contemporary application contradicts its stated purpose. Not every indefinite phrase is deep; not every precise statement is one-sided. What matters is the specific limit, rather than the number of qualifications.

The objection about self-application does not disappear after an everyday example, however. “Every subject is many-sided” is itself a general thesis. If a defender requires all others' assertions to be qualified, they must explain their own assertion's status. Can it be considered a statement about reality's structure, distinct from a particular description of one thing? Or must it also be limited to a certain level of consideration? Both answers require argument.

Our practical benefit must therefore not replace the philosophical dispute. A more accurate description of rent may be useful whether or not we accepted the whole doctrine. Yet this usefulness does not prove its universality. Nor does a difficult question about universality make every individual distinction useless. There is no necessary either/or between a system's complete truth and its concepts' zero value.

A space for substantive disagreement thus remains. An opponent may acknowledge that different parameters remove an apparent contradiction and ask whether that suffices for the entire Jain ontology. A defender may show an aspect of the subject the opponent ignores. Both will have to state their own grounds. This conversation is harder than a polite “Everyone is right,” but each person retains the possibility of really learning something.

9. What This Means in Practice

You can voluntarily take one evaluative statement around which a dispute arose: “The decision is successful,” “This person is reliable,” or “We have made progress.” Then clarify four parameters: which event is meant, which property is assessed, which period the assessment concerns, and which information supports it. Not all four are needed in every case; their task is to make the limit visible.

In an imagined family conversation, the result might sound like “Over a year, rent will fall, but travel time will increase. For one of us, that matters more than the financial benefit.” The dispute remains, but people now discuss an actual choice. They need not prove that one loves the family and the other does not simply because they weight consequences differently.

The next step is to identify missing information that matters. Is the necessary transport available? Can meetings with friends continue? What is the overall budget? Once these questions are answered, some initial assessments will change. If an assessment remains unchanged by any fact, we should check whether it expresses a preference or boundary better named directly.

Finally, a choice is possible while retaining two real aspects. A family may decide against moving while acknowledging the financial benefit. It may move while acknowledging a loss of convenience. Deciding does not require the chosen option to become good in every respect. This removes some unnecessary pressure: we choose on substantial grounds, rather than create a story in which no disadvantage exists.

If a question involves serious harm or safety, many-sidedness does not oblige anyone to continue a dangerous conversation for philosophical completeness. You can mark a boundary for action and return to inquiry separately. The right to say “This is enough for my decision” is compatible with acknowledging an incomplete picture.

10. A Precision That Leaves Room for the World

Jain thought does not ask us to cancel truth for politeness. It examines how to speak about complex existence without making one aspect the whole. The subject's reality, distinctions between perspectives, and explicit conditions of assertion matter here. These tasks do not make every opinion automatically correct.

A reader may reject Jain metaphysics and still retain a question: what exactly does my sentence assert, and what does it leave outside its field? This question is useful for pleasant and unpleasant assessments alike. It should not be used only to soften someone else's criticism or only to weaken one's own decision.

In our opening scene, the family may never agree. But “good” and “bad” now have intelligible relations, and the decision has visible grounds. This is a limited result, promising no final wisdom. Sometimes it is enough to make a dispute more honest.

We can keep our position clear while acknowledging its limit. In this combination, many-sidedness ceases to be decorative tolerance and becomes intellectual work: the world is allowed to be more complex than our first description, and the description to become more precise.

Sources Used

1. Marie-Hélène Gorisse. Jaina Philosophy. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023. §§3.4.1–4: realism, many-sidedness, modes, and qualified statement; primary passages from Tattvartha Sutra V.29 and Aptamimamsa 14–15 were read here.

2. Mark Owen Webb. Jain Philosophy. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. §2: the seven forms and the philosophical objection about self-application; the critical assessment belongs to the account's author.

3. Jasmine Kelly. Jain Beliefs. Jainpedia. “Soul,” “Karma,” and the initial account of vows: the religious context and differing obligations of householders and monastics.

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