

# Reflections on Stereotyped Ways of Seeing and an Introduction to 'Anekant'

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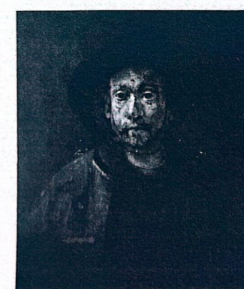
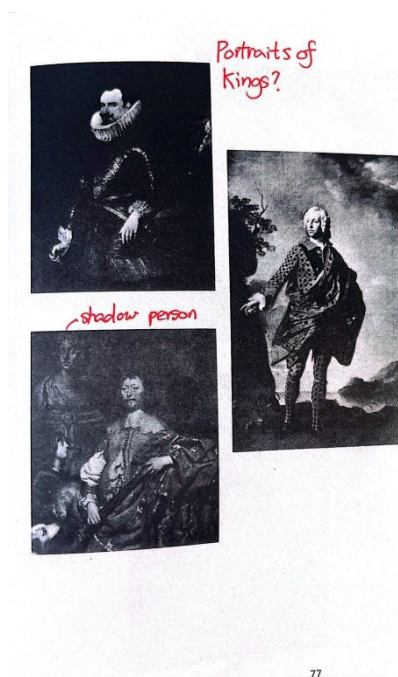
**Abstract:** This essay is inspired by *Ways of Seeing*, by John Berger, 2008. The photo essays in the book have led to this essay's focus on preconceptions and stereotypes. Stereotypes are formed just at the moment 'seeing' is taking place, and the possession of prior knowledge is mainly effective in such stereotype formation, even when people are viewing the unknown, a stereotype is working to classify and categorize the unknown into the known, the unfamiliar into the familiar, thus, a deviation from the truth (assuming there is an objective truth or relative truth, which means a fuller vision) occurs. Anekant (an idea in Jainism) is introduced as a possible solution to stereotyped thinking. Instead of cancelling out other opinions, the main teaching of Anekant is to smartly collaborate with every different viewpoint to have a fuller vision and to be nearer to the objective truth.

**Keywords:** Stereotypes, Anekant, Preconceptions, Perspectives.

## 1. Introduction

The book *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger has informed this essay with some reflections on preconceptions and stereotypes in terms of visual perception. It reveals how subjective and stereotyped thinking is functioning in the visual world concerning cultures, history and experience. Berger states in the book 'The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.' One interpretation of this sentence could be that people do not view objects the way they are, but in a subjective way along with their very context. This also means, the things we view could be "mirrors" reflecting the values we hold, we are viewing ourselves too in the process of seeing. It is just like the quote from Anaïs Nin, 'We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are.'

photo essays, the readers/viewers would gradually realize how is he/she constantly identifying and categorizing elements in every photo, which falls in line with the definition of stereotyping (a process involves classification of things or people). For example, In the 4<sup>th</sup> photo essay, pictures are shown without any captions, and readers/viewers would automatically identify characters in the paintings with different social statuses (royals, aristocrats, normal people, scientists etc.) by the clothes they are wearing even there is no direct hint indicating that their assumptions are true. Where do all these preconceptions come from? Could it be possible that our knowledge might be one of the causes of stereotypes? Are we able to view things more objectively? To have a deeper understanding of these questions, we might need to look at the study of stereotypes.



One thing that is particularly exceptional in Berger's book is the Photo Essay. It does not state its idea regarding preconception straight away, but when reading/viewing the

(Some pictures of the 4<sup>th</sup> photo essay)

## 2. Stereotypes and Jainism's Advice

### 2.1. Stereotypes

#### 2.1.1. Definition of Stereotypes

Before we move on to further discussion, the crystallization of the term 'stereotype' is vital. According to the dictionary of psychology (Cardwell, Mike 1999), a stereotype is a generalized belief about a particular category of people. Oxford dictionary defines it as a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. However, in this essay, a 'stereotype' does not just denote the categorization of people, but also stereotypes for objects in the material world, stereotyped knowledge (which means inflexible theories or values accepted and authorized by the mass without further consideration) and notions caused by limited perspective. It is not necessarily oversimplified; this essay emphasizes on the fixed feature of stereotypes based on limited observation and experience.

To explain the definition of stereotypes in this essay, an example is shown here:

In some countries, you cannot use the national flag as the rag publicly, such activity shall be interpreted as Anti-State behaviour or art performance. Usually, you cannot explain that "I am using the national flag to clean the floor only because it is there." There are 3 stereotypes in this situation: the flag, the floor, and the definition of respect. Because the national flag is a deified symbol that needs to be respected in a normal sense, the deemed opposite behaviours shall only be accepted as anti-behaviours. The idea of the floor symbolizing disrespectfulness is a stereotype that the floor is not pleasant based on the hierarchy of High/low. It is a stereotype sourced from the height that the things beyond our heads are great and the things beneath our feet are humble. Hence, the definition of respect and disrespect is a stereotype, too. Human actions to show respect are restricted in a certain manner. Furthermore, everything must have a meaning. This is one form of stereotype as well. Only children are forgiven for their naive acts of meaninglessness as people understand the fact that they are still exempt from the process of socialization, which is also a process of normalization.

Thus, the process of normalization is a process of commonly received stereotyping. A person without any knowledge of history, culture and social hierarchy can hardly decipher people who wear intricate and patterned dresses in oil paintings as aristocrats and others who wear plain and rustic clothes as normal people. He/she would have a different view toward those pictures, he/she would probably reckon the elegant dresses worn by the royals as only complicated rather than beautiful or a representation of status that is widely accepted in society. An infant (with vision) might view these beautifully decorated dresses as pure dresses as simple colours if he/she has not yet been taught what a human looks like.

#### 2.1.2. Stereotype as A Sense-Making Tool

In Stereotypes as Explanations (Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears, 2002), the author defined stereotypes as identifying individuals into groups. For further understanding, 3 principles/properties of stereotypes were put forward: '(a) stereotypes are aids to explanation, (b) stereotypes are energy-saving devices, (c) stereotypes are shared group beliefs.' In the following discussion, I would like to focus on the first principle in which stereotypes are

described as sense-making tools of complex situations. To complete the task of making sense, categorization is used as a supporting device to it, as Tajfel (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963) mentioned in his work 'stereotyping is an instantiation of the categorization process.' We identify people or objects by summarizing similarities and differences between them. It is essential for our minds to make sense of things viewed; the brain is everlastingly processing information received into an understandable form. Furthermore, it is usually hard for the brain to leave blank the viewed, as the author pointed out later in his statement regarding stereotype formation literature, that 'prior knowledge' is included when deciphering unknown messages. A total ignorance of the things viewed is hardly reached by the mind, even though a mind is clear with any prior knowledge, the adoption of a new stereotype seems to be inevitable.

Two of the questions that have been raised before can now be partly explained with a basic understanding of stereotypes.

#### 1. Where do all these preconceptions come from?

*Based on what we have just learned from the book, the inevitable preconceptions of the photos viewed might stem from the mind's constant demand of identifying and categorizing, thus turning the unknown into the known.*

#### 2. Could it be possible that our knowledge might be one of the causes of stereotypes?

*As the author mentioned and explained 'prior knowledge', our knowledge could be one factor that causes stereotypes. In fact, knowledge is the precondition of stereotypes, without it, any impressions can hardly be formed.*

For the other question 'Are we able to view things more objectively?' I would like to leave it for further discussion concerning Jainism's view of objectivity.

## 2.2. Anekant: A Possible Solution to Stereotyped Thinking

#### 2.2.1. Definition of Anekant

Anekantavada (or Anekant for abbreviation) is usually translated as 'Many-Sidedness' in English. It comprises two Sanskrit words: *anekānta* (not one side) and *vāda* (doctrine). So, the literal translation for it should be 'Non-One-Sided Doctrine', which denotes 'Multiple Facets Doctrine'. The abbreviation 'Anekant' would be used in the following paragraphs for convenient purpose.

Before we try to explain what Anekant is, a little story might trigger some thoughts:

*'There was once a group of blind men who approached an elephant. One of them touched the animal's ears and perceived a flat, fan-like creature. Another man touched the leg and found a thick, round post and another found the trunk and thought the elephant was like a long, hairy rope. Finally, the owner of the elephant said to them: 'All of you are correct, but you are also wrong because each of you has touched only one side of the elephant. Each of you is right from your standpoint, but the truth is something different altogether.'*

(Quoted from the book Many-Sided Wisdom)

This parable has been told a lot of times in Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism and social psychology. The relationship between partial truth and wholeness is perfectly metaphorized in this little story. The idea of acknowledging ignorance and limitedness of perception was also brought out, which could be understood as the first practice of Anekant. Such acknowledgement could prevent us from binary/linear thinking that lay boundaries and continuously conflict with any other ideas. Knowing our perceptions are only partially true can also help us to understand the possibility of our 'seeing' being a stereotype.

After knowing limitations, living and coexisting with limitations is the next step. Since our perspectives are limited and partially true, denying other ideas to prove single rightfulness is not a sensitive way in pursuit of objectivity. Alternatively, Anekant's advice on the exchange of ideas could be a solution to stereotyped thinking and ideological collision. Give up dogmatic and single-minded thinking and see things from a new but relevant perspective, and the rationality and logic of the other ideas shall be found. Assuming everyone's perception is more or less stereotyped, integrating different "stereotypes" together somehow helps us have a broader and fuller vision of one thing viewed.

#### 2.2.2. Syadvada(Maybe-ism)

Practical realizations of Anekant can be found in the teachings of Syadvada (Maybe-ism, Perhaps-ism or Could-be-ism). Put simply, syadvada is mainly about accepting multiple viewpoints including opposite opinions conditionally under a certain context. A syadvada answer is 'neither yes nor no', nor approval or disapproval under a certain premise. A syadvada attitude is very discreet and meticulous, it is an open-minded attitude that embraces various propositions, yet remains its preciseness to assess and evaluate the plausibility of each claim. There are seven predicates of syadvada:

1. *Affirmation: syād-asti—in some ways, it is,*
2. *Denial: syān-nāsti—in some ways, it is not,*
3. *Joint but successive affirmation and denial: syād-asti-nāsti—in some ways, it is, and it is not,*
4. *Joint and simultaneous affirmation and denial: syāt-asti-avaktavyaḥ—in some ways, it is, and it is indescribable,*
5. *Joint and simultaneous affirmation and denial: syān-nāsti-avaktavyaḥ—in some ways, it is not, and it is indescribable,*
6. *Joint and simultaneous affirmation and denial: syād-asti-nāsti-avaktavyaḥ—in some ways, it is, it is not, and it is indescribable,*
7. *Joint and simultaneous affirmation and denial: syād-avaktavyaḥ—in some ways, it is indescribable.*

(Quoted from the book Many-Sided Wisdom)

In Many-Sided Wisdom, Syadvada is explained as 'a description of a type of limited human viewpoint and a way of acknowledging its limitedness'. The term 'indescribable' is mentioned in four of the seven predicates. This means the indescribability of the mystical fields of life that no words can accommodate. If we try to describe the indescribable, misunderstanding is prone to occur. A such example could be seen in Art. When viewing some great pieces of Art, one might be deeply moved, at this moment, no words but only

tears can fulfil this exceptional feeling. The intuitive connection with Art is indescribable and creates a bond between the viewer and the Art stronger than any critical comments about Art. This is a moment of integration.

Jainism believes that everyone's viewpoint is conditioned and subjective. Objectivity is a total ignorance of the things viewed, which means no comments and no viewpoints. Language is limited. The definition means stereotype because it is a form of comments, and comments are made by a specific human being with limited experience (which means he/she is not omniscient) because he/she cannot experience everyone in the world, his/her comments are subjective because his/her being(idea) is the demonstration of subjectivity. This can be seen in a person's view or feeling of various things, as culture and experience together form one's opinion. In essence, a person's subjective viewpoint of one thing reflects his/her value and attitude, what you see is conditioned by what you value. For instance, John Berger is a Marxist, and many of his reviews on art critique are conditioned by his thinking on capital and class, which is partially right under the Marxist context, but alone cannot be a full explanation to reveal the complete truth of Art.

#### 2.2.3. 'Either/Not' or 'Both/And'

Dr Aidan Rankin has mentioned the idea of 'either/not' and 'both/and' in his book (Rankin, 2010). The former is the logic that the fact of a thing is either A or not A. The latter is the logic that the fact could be both A and B. For an illustration, In Ways of Seeing, the author John Berger saw the painting Mr and Mrs Andrews by Gainsborough 1727-1788 as a display of the priority of the landowners at that time, which was argued by Professor Lawrence Gowing that the couple were engaged in 'philosophical enjoyment' of the great nature rather than being interested in their property. Since both claims are assumptions based on the commentators' values, the logic such as 'Mr and Mrs Andrews were either interested in their property or not' can never be persuasive enough since none of them can be proved. However, Berger made a wiser and stronger claim that Mr and Mrs Andrews were both proud landowners interested in their private land and a lovely couple who were enjoying the genuity of Nature, as 'In most cases, the possession of private land was the precondition for such philosophic enjoyment'. The final statement made by Berger could be a manifestation of 'both/and' logic, which could be an Anekant logic which emphasizes the inclusion of opposing views. We do not necessarily reach the truth or objectivity by this logic, but somehow, we would have a fuller vision of the things viewed and might reach the proximity of the truth.

#### 2.2.4. Collaboration of Views

Anekant's opinion on objectivity is different from relativism, whose attitude remains reserved about objective truth. Anekant's whole theoretical system is based on the pursuit of objective truth (Rankin, 2010). The practitioners of Anekant believe in infinite ways of climbing the mountain of truth. When viewing an object, an Anekant practitioner would not just preserve his/her view, he/she also listens to others' opinions, not to argue nor dispute, but to receive their opinions like a treasure, to preserve, and combine all these ideas to have a little glimpse of the wholeness. The Jain Idea of objectivity is like the process of completing a jigsaw puzzle, the more puzzle you have collected, the closer you are to the ultimate objectivity. Yet, one could never know if he/she has already reached objectivity, so a humble attitude is often required to constantly self-review for not being dictatorial and one-sided about a subjective view. Accepting multiple truths

does not only mean tolerating different opinions but also accepting others' ignorance in the fields they are unfamiliar with. Moreover, accepting that, we are limited and sometimes stereotyped observers, there is still so much we do not know, when encountering unknown questions, an Anekant solution sometimes leaves the questions unsolved rather than allocating the unfamiliar into the familiar classification, which might form stereotypes. An acknowledgement of ignorance is the defiance of ignorance, which opens a door to the broader sea of knowledge.

*'Therefore, if we wish to approach the truth, we must constantly qualify our viewpoints and consider what is not there more than what is. We cannot know anything unless we are conscious of how much we do not know. We cannot believe anything unless we are aware of other beliefs and the aspects of truth they might contain.'* (Rankin, 2010)

Anyway, the Jain idea of Anekant is not constrained to its believers. Since it talks about the completeness and benefits of diversity in its essence, the practice of Anekant is open to people from multiple cultural and ethnic backgrounds. A conversion to Jainism is not necessary when practising the spiritual teachings of Anekant.

Jainism has shown astonishing flexibility and vitality to adapt to other cultures while maintaining the Jain principles. While Hinduism is dominant in Indian society, Jainism has remained distinctive, yet adaptable over the past few thousand years. Its interculturalism is still recognizable in a variety of countries in the present world such as Canada, the UK and the USA etc. The pivotal reason for its sustainability is none other, than Anekant.

### 3. Summary

In general, when viewing objects, paintings or people, we

inevitably tend to understand them by the prior knowledge that has been stored in our heads, which is prone to form stereotypes. Since this is a rather uncontrollable natural process of the mind, we might not be able to avoid stereotyping, but with the acknowledgement of our limitations, we can prevent our views from being dictatorial and dogmatic. According to the Jain teaching of Anekant, though personal views might be biased, we stand a chance to reach relative objectivity by collaborating and embracing miscellaneous views together.

### Acknowledgment

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