

THE PEACOCK'S EGG: BHARTṚHARI ON LANGUAGE AND REALITY

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Anyone who has ever opened a book on Indian philosophy will have been struck by the sometimes strange doctrines that were held by the different schools, and may have wondered to what extent it is possible really to understand Indian philosophy. And what do we mean when we say that we understand this or that Indian thinker, or Indian philosophy in general? Indeed, to what extent did individual philosophers themselves understand the philosophies they wrote about? The Sāṃkhya philosophy, to take an example, proclaims the existence of twenty-five factors (which they call *tattvas*) that somehow evolve out of each other so as to create the phenomenal world. Did individual Sāṃkhya thinkers know why exactly these twenty-five factors had to be accepted and not any others? Did they perhaps accept these factors simply because they had been sanctioned by their particular tradition, and because early exposure lent them a degree of plausibility that they are unlikely to acquire in the case of those who do not become acquainted with them until later in life? If this is so, how much understanding can we modern scholars ever hope to attain? Are we condemned merely to record what the Indian thinkers thought, perhaps adding a historical dimension by investigating how some of these ideas succeed more or less similar earlier ones? Or a social dimension by pointing out that this or that position served the interests of this or that particular philosopher and those of his group? Such investigations, which put Indian philosophy in its historical and social contexts, are to be sure, possible and extremely important. Historical continuities have been studied and more will no doubt be discovered. But is this as far as we can go? If so, our understanding of Indian philosophy will not be very different from that of mythology: a number of just-so stories that we can study in their historical and social contexts.

Advocates of Indian philosophy will no doubt object that there is much more to Indian philosophy than just this. They will point out that some of the discussions and analyses resemble, sometimes anticipate, certain discussions and analyses found in Western philosophy. Such advocates often have a tendency to take these discussions and analyses out of their original context and concentrate, say, on the development of logic in the Indian schools. There can be no doubt that logic underwent a remarkable development in India that still draws far too little attention outside a limited group of experts. But this logic was used—and this is too easily overlooked—to defend the basic doctrinal positions of the schools concerned. These doctrinal positions themselves are often somehow taken for granted, or even played down, by modern investigators. If we wish to give these positions their due, we are back with our original question: to what extent can we understand the thought of an Indian

philosopher, not merely those aspects of it that we choose (and remove from their original context) because they remind us of issues in Western philosophy?

I will argue that a deeper understanding, one that goes beyond mere historical and sociological analyses, is possible in the case of an important part of Indian philosophy. This is due to a factor that too rarely draws the attention of modern scholars. I am speaking of the presence of a tradition of rational debate and inquiry. I use this expression to refer to a tradition that came to establish itself in India—or at least in the main philosophical schools—and that obliged thinkers to listen to the criticism of often unfriendly critics, even where it concerned their most sacred convictions, such as those supposedly based on revelation, tradition, or inspiration. Confrontations between thinkers so radically opposed to each other were no doubt facilitated by the debates organized from time to time by kings, about which we have some firsthand information from the pen of Chinese pilgrims visiting India in the middle centuries of the first millennium. Little is known about the reasons why, and the date when, this tradition of critical debate came to establish itself in India. Its effects, however, are visible in the efforts made by Indian thinkers to systematize their positions, to make them coherent and immune to criticism.

These reflections allow us to identify a particularly important factor in the development of Indian philosophy. Under pressure from competitors, the Indian thinkers of the early classical period were forced to do more than just preserve the teachings they had received; they had to improve and refine them—perhaps in order to avoid becoming the laughingstock of those they might have to confront at a royal court or on some other occasion. In doing so, they created systems of philosophy that might deviate considerably from the pre-systematic teachings that they had inherited.

The history of Indian philosophy, seen in this way, becomes the story of the search for coherence and immunity to criticism, starting normally—but not always, it seems—with some form of traditional teaching. This traditional teaching is usually of a nonphilosophical nature. Buddhist philosophy in its various manifestations, for example, based itself ultimately on the teaching of the Buddha, which concerned the escape from suffering and rebirth and had no philosophical pretensions whatsoever. Several centuries separate the Buddha from the beginning of Buddhist systematic philosophy, centuries during which well-meaning monks organized the original teaching in various ways. Buddhist systematic philosophy, when it finally arose, was based on, and continued in a way, these attempts at organizing. It tried to introduce coherence and drew conclusions. Buddhist philosophy thus arose out of the attempt to introduce order and coherence in the received teachings. Other schools of philosophy proceeded similarly.

A history of Indian philosophy worth the name will have to deal in detail with the ways in which various early teachings were transformed into coherent systems of thought. This is of necessity a somewhat technical endeavor, which I do not plan to undertake, at least not in this essay. However, in their search for coherence and immunity to criticism Indian philosophers were also confronted with the question to what extent their doctrines were compatible with certain convictions shared by all,

or practically all, of them. Such shared convictions existed. Practically all philosophers of classical India, for example, believed in the doctrine of karma, and all believed in the close correspondence between language and reality. The reflective analysis of these two convictions exerted a profound influence on the doctrines of the various schools. Some of these doctrines can indeed be looked upon as the direct outcome of this intellectual confrontation. In this essay I will concentrate on the second of these two convictions: the belief in the close correspondence between language and reality.

Correspondence between language and reality means first of all that the objects in the phenomenal world correspond to the words of language. This observation may sound innocent enough, but it was given quite amazing twists by certain thinkers. Many Buddhists, for example, had come to believe that the objects of our phenomenal world do not really exist. They do not exist because they are composites: they consist of constituent parts. For reasons that cannot be dealt with at this moment these Buddhists maintained that only the constituent parts exist, but anything that is made up of them, that is, macroscopic—any of the things that fill phenomenal reality—does not. This led them to ask the question: what are these macroscopic objects, and why do we tend to think they exist? The answer is that they are nothing but words—or, if you like, notions imposed upon reality by the words of language. Most Brahmanical thinkers disagreed with the imputed unreality of the phenomenal world, but agreed that there is a close correspondence between words and things. Some of them went to the extent of analyzing the use of words in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of objective reality.

All of these developments, although important, cannot be dealt with here. However, the belief in the correspondence between language and reality was extended, during the early centuries of the common era, from a mere belief in the correspondence between words and things to something more encompassing that includes the conviction that *statements* as well correspond to the situations they describe. Or, more precisely (but still not perfectly): the words that make up a statement correspond to the “things” that constitute the situation described. Once again this conviction looks relatively harmless at first sight. After all, a statement like “John eats an apple” might be taken to describe a situation that is constituted of the three elements John, the act of eating, and an apple. Many, perhaps most, statements are such that they do not necessarily clash with this conviction. But some do. Take “John makes a pot.” This statement describes a situation in which John and the act of making have their place, but the pot is not yet there. In other words, the words that make up the statement “John makes a pot” do not correspond to the “things” that constitute the situation described. The same difficulty arises whenever something is said about something coming into being. If we say “The pot comes into being,” there is clearly nothing in the situation described corresponding to the word “pot.”

I am sure that many people nowadays would conclude from statements like “John makes a pot” and “the pot comes into being” that apparently the words of a statement do not always correspond to the elements that make up the situation described. This would certainly be my reaction. Interestingly, to the best of my

knowledge all Indian thinkers of, say, the first five centuries of the common era did not draw this conclusion. I have studied the question in some detail and considered the writings of authors belonging to all currents of Indian philosophy, belonging to all three major religions of that period: Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism.¹ To my growing surprise I found that all these thinkers held on to this position and tried in various ways to resolve the difficulties to which it gave rise. All of them believed that the words of a statement correspond to the elements that make up the situation described, also in the case of statements like “John makes a pot” and “the pot comes into being.”

Shortly I will discuss some of the solutions that were offered to the problems that arise in this manner. First, however, I wish to deal with a question that may cross your minds at this point. Why did the Indian thinkers of that period—all of them—hold on to a conviction that is so obviously in contradiction with everyday experience? Is this another example of intellectuals accepting a position whose absurdity is visible to a child? Is this one more case of philosophers gone haywire?

I am not at all inclined to draw any such conclusions, and I would like to draw attention to two factors that no doubt encouraged the thinkers of that time not to give up their position simply because it seemed to contradict everyday experience. For one thing, a number of thinkers, most notably the Buddhists, had already for other reasons come to the conclusion that the phenomenal world is ultimately not real. A contradiction between phenomenal reality and the conviction they cherished could not, therefore, endanger this conviction. Equally important is the presence in India at that time of a tradition of rational inquiry, which I mentioned earlier. Philosophers had become convinced that their reasons and arguments were entitled to being taken seriously—as seriously or even more so than tradition, revelation, and insight. We know that in ancient Greece one group of thinkers, the Eleatics, did not hesitate to reject perceived reality on the basis not of tradition, revelation, or special insight but of mere argument. The early Indian thinkers, too, proceeded on the basis of their newly acquired confidence in the power of human reason. Those of us who feel superior to them might do well to recall that our phenomenal reality, too, hides a plethora of entities—molecules, atoms, subatomic particles—the existence of which we willingly accept on the basis of reasons provided and experiments carried out by others.

What solutions did the Indian thinkers offer to the difficulties they thus encountered, and which we might be tempted to consider to be of their own making? What does the word “pot” refer to in the sentences “John makes a pot” and “the pot comes into being”? The literature concerned contains a variety of answers, as I said earlier. Here I will concentrate on only a few of them.

Perhaps the simplest and in a way most obvious answer was adopted by the Sāṃkhya school of Brahmanical philosophy, mentioned earlier. We are relatively well informed about the early history of this school. Most elements of its classical teachings figure in early works, such as the great epic of India, the *Mahābhārata*, and other texts. One important element, however, is never mentioned in these early accounts and must have been a rather recent innovation. I am speaking of *satkāra-*

yavāda, the doctrine according to which the effect exists before it is produced. Very concretely, this means that the situation described by the statement "John makes a pot" or "the pot comes into being" contains already a pot, be it that the pot at that moment is still hidden in the clay from which it is being made.

Satkāryavāda becomes an essential part of classical Sāṃkhya philosophy; it is taken over by some schools and vehemently combated by others. The scholastic debates about this issue in later texts make one easily forget how profoundly strange this doctrine really is (not only for modern Western readers!). They may have the further effect that the doctrine becomes familiar, and that one stops being surprised by its extraordinary content. Familiarity is easily mistaken for understanding. A better understanding, I submit, can be obtained by becoming aware of what specific problem the doctrine was meant to solve. In the case of *satkāryavāda* this problem was the direct consequence of certain ideas regarding the relationship between language and reality shared by all thinkers of that time.

The problem was shared by all thinkers, but they did not all propose the same solution. An altogether different solution was proposed by a particularly famous thinker, Nāgārjuna. In order to understand his solution we have to take into account that Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist. The Buddhists of his time, as I pointed out earlier, had come to believe that the phenomenal world does not really exist. This belief had not been part of the message taught by the historical Buddha. It was the result rather of subsequent elaborations and reinterpretations of the early teachings. Whatever the details of this development—with which we cannot deal at this moment—the Buddhists had come to *believe*, on the presumed authority of the Buddha, that the phenomenal world does not really exist—but they could not *prove* it. This changed, however, with Nāgārjuna, who could. The phenomenal world does not exist because it *cannot* exist. And it cannot exist because it is self-contradictory.

The basic argument to prove this has already been sketched above. The statement "the pot comes into being" describes a situation that must contain a pot. It does not. The statement is therefore contradictory, and nothing comes into being. I will cite one verse from Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that deals with this particular problem: "If any unproduced entity is found anywhere it could be produced. Since that entity does not exist, what is produced?"² In the case of our pot this means: if there is a pot at the time it is going to be produced, it can be produced. If there is no such pot, the subject of "the pot is produced" has nothing to refer to, and the statement is empty. This is true if we assume, as Nāgārjuna apparently did, that the terms of a statement have to refer to something that is there in the situation described.

Nāgārjuna proved, with this and similar arguments, what a number of Buddhists had already believed before and without him. He did more, however. By introducing these rather nihilistic arguments into Buddhist philosophy he created a school of philosophy, known by the name of Madhyamaka or Mādhyamika, that survived for a long time in India and survives to this day among Tibetan Buddhists.

My reflections so far have shown, I hope, that at least two crucially important doctrines held by different schools of Indian philosophy found their historical origin

not in meditative experience or supernatural revelation but in the need to deal with difficulties arising from shared assumptions. The *satkāryavāda* of Sāṃkhya and the nihilism of Madhyamaka are both to be understood as responses to a conviction, shared by all thinkers of that time, concerning the relationship between language and reality that at first view would barely seem to justify such encompassing metaphysical conclusions.

I will now turn to Bhartṛhari, a Brahmanical thinker of the fifth century of the common era who is best known today as a "linguistic philosopher." Bhartṛhari owes this reputation to the fact that the Indian grammarians, who were and remained primarily linguists with few or no philosophical aspirations, came to accept him as a—or rather the—philosopher of grammar. They added his philosophy, or part of it, to their own rather technical and nonphilosophical reflections, and now claimed that grammar, too, had a philosophical dimension. Also, some modern scholars have concentrated on aspects of Bhartṛhari's thought that, they claim, show similarities with modern linguistics.

But whatever we think of the reputation that Bhartṛhari acquired in later times, he was, first of all, a thinker of his own time who thought about the problems that were around at that time. One of the problems he had to confront is the one we have just discussed: how a pot can come into being if it is not yet there.

There can be no doubt that this problem played a central role in Bhartṛhari's thinking. He formulates it most clearly in the following verse: "If [something] exists [already], why does it come into being? But if it does not exist, how does it come into being?"³ What is more, he offers no less than four different solutions to this problem in four different parts of his *Vākyapadiya*. The challenge, as you will recall, is to find something that the word "pot" in the statement "the pot comes into being" refers to and that is part of the situation described. Unlike the Sāṃkhyas, who claim that the pot already exists at the time it comes into being, and unlike Nāgārjuna, who claims that the very statement is self-contradictory, Bhartṛhari presents objects that are present in the situation described and that are, he proposes, referred to by the word "pot." His first suggestion is that the word "pot" refers to the universal that inheres in all pots. He borrowed this notion of universals from another school of philosophy, but gave it an interpretation that was uniquely his own. For him the universal is not just an eternal and unchangeable "thing" that inheres in all pots; no, from Bhartṛhari's point of view the universal plays an active role in manifesting the pot.

His second solution to the problem at hand is that the word "pot" refers to the substance of which the pot is made—or better: is going to be made. This substance is there while the pot is being made, so that the word "pot" does refer to something, even at the time that the pot is being produced.

Bhartṛhari's third solution is altogether different. He realizes that the demand that the words constituting a sentence have to refer to something in the situation described leads to major difficulties, for example in the case of negative existential statements. If I say "Martians do not exist," what does the word "Martians" refer to? Not to anything out there, one would say. Bhartṛhari solves this problem by maintaining

that words refer to a metaphorical reality (*aupacārikī sattā*), which is different from absolute reality. He adds: "Metaphorical reality shows the own form of all [things] in all their states."⁴ "In all their states" probably means in the past, present, and future. In other words, the word "pot" in "the pot comes into being" refers to the metaphorical existence of the pot, which shows it in its future state; or, more simply, although perhaps less accurately, it refers to the future pot.

Bhartrhari's fourth solution, finally, is as simple as it is obvious: the word "pot" refers to a mental reality, that is, to the pot that is in my mind (*that I have in mind*) when I pronounce the statement "the pot comes into being." This final solution is so obvious, one would think, that one wonders why Bhartrhari has not offered it right from the beginning and, indeed, why others before him had not hit upon this solution much earlier. This peculiar absence may have to be explained by the fact that the thinkers I have mentioned so far were very concerned about distinguishing themselves from the idealistic concepts that were gaining influence at that time in some schools of Indian philosophy.

Having briefly considered the four solutions offered by Bhartrhari to the problem connected with the coming into being of a pot, you may wish to know which of these four is Bhartrhari's own. To my knowledge the *Vākyapadīya* contains nothing that would allow us to make such a choice. And indeed, it seems that Bhartrhari did not express, and may not have had, any preference. This is the peculiar feature of his philosophical writings, which the Dutch scholar Jan Houben has called Bhartrhari's "perspectivism": different positions are correct from different points of view.

This should not be taken to imply that Bhartrhari had no philosophy of his own, and that all he does is present various points of view without choosing between them. It seems quite clear that Bhartrhari has drawn at least one very clear, and important, conclusion from his various lucubrations about pots that do or do not come into being, namely that phenomenal reality is unreal, and different from absolute reality. Bhartrhari's conclusion is in one important respect different from the one drawn by Nāgārjuna. The latter, if Claus Oetke's analyses are correct, had come to the conclusion that nothing exists, nothing is absolutely real. Bhartrhari agrees that phenomenal reality is unreal, but differs from Nāgārjuna in claiming that there is another reality that *is* real. After our reflections about the coming into being of the pot, it goes without saying that absolute reality for Bhartrhari does not come into being, and indeed does not change.

Bhartrhari's concept of absolute reality is interesting, especially if one contrasts it with the position of many Buddhists of his time and before him. Those Buddhists claimed that the objects of the phenomenal world cannot be real, because they are composite. These composite objects are in the end nothing but words; that is to say, phenomenal reality is in the end nothing but a trick played upon us by language. Bhartrhari agrees with the last statement. Phenomenal reality is indeed the result of language, but language does not *combine* the ultimately real constituents (as some Buddhists believed). On the contrary, it *divides* the ultimately real totality of all there is, which is absolute reality.

Bhartrhari here introduces the notion that a whole, a totality, can be more real

than its parts. This sounds at first rather strange, but here his background in grammar and linguistics came to his help. It is a well-known fact, noted by thinkers long before Bhartrhari, that a word in language is more than the mere accumulation of the sounds that constitute it. Some Buddhist thinkers had, perhaps for this very reason, postulated, already before the beginning of the common era, that words are entities that are different from their constituent sounds. They had claimed the same for whole sentences, which are more than the combination of the words that constitute them. The important grammarian Patañjali (ca. 150 B.C.E.), too, had made similar claims with regard to words. Here, then, Bhartrhari found examples of objects that are more than their combined constituents. Words are more than their constituent sounds, and sentences are more than the words in them. Strictly speaking, sounds are not parts of words, because the latter are altogether different entities, and words are not parts of sentences that, once again, are different entities. It is in this context that Bhartrhari brings in the example of the peacock's egg, mentioned in the title of this essay. The word, which in itself has no parts and no sequence, unfolds itself so as to give rise to something that appears to have both, just as the vital essence (*rasa*) of a peacock's egg, which does not possess the variety of colors of a peacock, unfolds itself so as to give rise to a peacock that does.⁵ Bhartrhari generalizes this idea, and claims, for example, that pots, too, have no parts.⁶

For Bhartrhari, then, the world, and each object in it, has two aspects: the one real, the other unreal. *Vākyapadīya* 3.1.32, for example, speaks of "the real and the unreal parts that are present in each thing."⁷ The phenomenal world is unreal. It is the result of an (unreal) division of the undivided absolute.⁸ The essential reality of things, we read elsewhere in the *Vākyapadīya*, is beyond differentiation: "With regard to things (*bhāva*), whose reality is beyond differentiation (*vikalpātīta*), the world is followed in linguistic expressions (*vyavahāra*) that are based on conventions (*saṃketa*)."⁹ Here it is stated that linguistic expressions correspond to the unreal divisions of reality. Another verse tells us more about the division at stake here: "Heaven, earth, wind, sun, oceans, rivers, the directions, these are divisions of the reality belonging to the inner organ, [even though] they are situated outside it."¹⁰ Note that this verse does not prove that Bhartrhari was an idealist, that he denied the existence of the outside world. It states rather that the divisions of the outside world are produced by the inner organ, and therefore by words, as we shall see.

Words separate things from each other: "By force of the [fact that understanding has the form of words], every produced thing is distinguished [from other things]."¹¹ Words are the only basis of the nature of things and of their use."¹² It follows that those who know the nature of things see the power of words."¹³ Bhartrhari elaborates on the power of words in the following verses: "The power residing in words is the basis of this whole universe. . . . Since the difference between *śaḍja* and other [musical notes] is perceived [only] when explained by words, all categories of objects are based on the measures of words."¹⁴ The creative power of language is exemplified by the illusion of a circle created by a firebrand turned around: "It is observed in the case of a torch-wheel et cetera, that the form of an object is perceived on account of words (*śruti*), even though the basis [of the perception] is

entirely different."¹⁵ "There is no cognition in the world that does not follow words. All knowledge appears as if permeated by words."¹⁶ "It is from words that things proceed; [words] create the distinctions [in the phenomenal world]."¹⁷ One might be tempted to think that this last line speaks about meanings rather than things; both are called *artha* in Sanskrit. Bhartṛhari speaks, however, about things in the objective world. This is particularly clear from a passage of his commentary on the *Mahābhāṣya*, often called *Mahābhāṣyadīpikā*, where the perception of words such as "heaven," *apūrva*, and "divinity" are presented as means to infer (*anumāna*) the existence of the corresponding objects: "Just as the words 'heaven,' *apūrva*, and 'divinity,' when perceived, are the means to infer the existence of objects never observed."¹⁸ The same three objects—"heaven," *apūrva*, and "divinity"—are mentioned in the following, slightly obscure, verse of the *Vākyapadīya*: "The sign of the thing denoted is that there is an object corresponding to all words. In the case of words like 'cow,' they say, it is similar to 'heaven,' *apūrva*, and 'divinity'."¹⁹

It will be clear from these quotations that the connection between language and phenomenal reality is close. And the language concerned is Sanskrit. But Bhartṛhari goes further. The fundamental unit of language is the sentence; this is equally true of the Vedic sentence.²⁰ This is important: it shows that Bhartṛhari does not merely postulate a correspondence between individual words and elements of the phenomenal world. The link between statements, Vedic statements in particular, and the phenomenal world is as important, or even more important. We shall return to this point shortly. First we consider some of Bhartṛhari's observations with regard to the role of the Veda in the unfolding of phenomenal reality: "Different sciences unfold based on the primary and secondary limbs of that [Veda] which is the organizing principle (*vidhātṛ*) of the worlds, [sciences] that are the causes of the mental traces (*saṃskāra*) of knowledge."²¹ The context of this verse leaves no doubt that it actually concerns the Veda, and that therefore the Veda is the organizing principle, or perhaps one is entitled to translate: creator, of the worlds. A comparison with *Vākyapadīya* 3.14.198ab, cited above ("It is from words that things proceed; [words] create the distinctions [in the phenomenal world]"), which, too, uses the verb *vi-dhā*, shows that the creation of the world is essentially a division, a differentiation, of the undivided absolute. Another verse explains the relationship between the Veda and the world in the following terms: "Those who know the sacred tradition know that this [universe] is a transformation of the word. In the beginning this universe proceeds exclusively from Vedic verses."²²

The world having been created, or organized, by the Veda, tradition (*āgama smṛti*) bases itself on the Veda: "The texts of tradition (*smṛti*), which are multifarious and have visible as well as invisible aims, have been arranged by knowers of the Veda on the basis of the [Veda] with the help of indicators."²³ This implies, for Bhartṛhari, that the link between tradition and the world is close, too. The world follows the rules of the word: "Even if [all] philosophies had disappeared, and there would not be other authors, the world would not deviate from the rules expressed by the Veda (*śruti*) and by the tradition (*smṛti*)."²⁴ This implies, among other things, that the rules of behavior are in a way inherent in the world: "All duties (*itikartavyātā*) in

the world are based on words; even a child knows them because of the mental impressions (*saṃskāra*) acquired earlier."²⁵ The intuition (*pratibhā*), which is called "meaning of the sentence" and which makes us know our duties, either can be the result of verbal instruction or it can be inborn: "Whether the [intuition] is directly produced by the word or by the result of impulsions (*bhāvanā*), no one deviates from it where duties (*itikartavyātā*) are concerned."²⁶ Even animals are guided by this intuition: "Under the influence of that [intuition] even the animals act... Who changes the sound of the male cuckoo in spring? How have animals learnt to build nests and the like? Who induces wild animals and birds to eat, love, hate, swim, and so on, activities well known among the descendants of each species?"²⁷

These verses have been interpreted to mean that the hereditary knowledge one finds among animals and in children is the result of the use of language in an earlier existence.²⁸ Nothing in the text supports this point of view. It is true that living beings are born with impulsions (*bhāvanā*) or mental traces (*saṃskāra*), which are linguistic by nature, but it would appear that these linguistic impulsions are not, or not always, the results of instructions in an earlier life.²⁹ One could here repeat Bhartṛhari's question: what verbal impulsions would change the sound of the male cuckoo in spring? Bhartṛhari himself answers this question, and the others that accompany it, in the following verses: "It comes from tradition (*āgama*) only, which follows the impulsions (*bhāvanā*). As for the tradition, it is different [for each individual] depending on the proximity or distance."³⁰ Six forms of intuition (*pratibhā*) are known, depending on whether they are produced by the own nature, the Vedic school, practice, Yoga, by the invisible (*adṛṣṭa*), or by a special [cause]."³¹ It follows that there is natural knowledge: "Since knowledge is natural, the traditional religious and scientific treatises (*śāstra*) serve no purpose whatsoever."³² This also applies to morality: "With regard to the two positions 'this is virtuous' and 'this is sinful,' there is little use for religious and scientific treatises (*śāstra*) right down to the untouchables."³³

Bhartṛhari uses the word *bhāvanā*, "impulsion," at several other occasions in the *Vākyapadīya*. The "impulsion of the word" (*śabdabhāvanā*) is required to set the speech organs in motion, to emit an upward breath, and to make the points of articulation strike each other.³⁴ The impulsions, moreover, cause the imaginary divisions of the sentence, which has, in reality, no parts: "Although the meaning of the sentence is without divisions, the imagined divisions are based on *bhāvanā*."³⁵

The direct link between words and things explains the effects words can have on things: "Just as it is observed that colors et cetera have well-defined capacities with regard to certain things, in the same way one observes that words [have well-defined capacities] to remove snake poison et cetera. Just as they have a capacity to do this [to remove snake poison et cetera] it should be understood that they also [have a capacity] to [produce] merit. Therefore, good people desiring elevation (*abhyudaya*) should use correct words."³⁶ The capacity to produce merit belongs to correct words only: "On the basis of traditional knowledge [received] from the well-educated, correct words are established as a means toward merit. While there is no difference in expressing the meaning, incorrect words are the opposite (i.e., not a means toward merit)."³⁷

The link between words and things having been established, the study of language, and of Sanskrit in particular, enables one to reach conclusions about the world. Bhartṛhari uses the words of Patañjali, who says in his *Mahābhāṣya*: "We accept the word as authority. What the word says is authoritative for us."³⁸ Exactly the same phrase can be found in the *Śābara Bhāṣya*,³⁹ but Bhartṛhari clearly gives it a wider interpretation. His *Vākyapadīya* observes: "People accept the word as authority; they are followed [in this] by the religious and scientific treatises (*śāstra*)."⁴⁰

We return to Bhartṛhari's acceptance of the sentence as the primary linguistic unit. This implies that the phenomenal world corresponds to statements, first of all Vedic statements. This explains that, according to Bhartṛhari, injunctions and other rules are somehow built into the phenomenal world. Individual words do not constitute injunctions, or *śāstras*, or rules of behavior for animals and humans. And it is through its sentences that the Veda becomes what it is. If the world is created, or organized, in accordance with the Veda, Vedic sentences must be meant, not just individual Vedic words.

I hope that what I have said so far shows the extent to which Bhartṛhari was both a philosopher who dealt with current problems and challenges and a traditionalist. In fact, his writings are quite specific about his respect for tradition. We read here, for example: "Without tradition, logic cannot establish virtue (*dharma*); even the knowledge of seers derives from tradition."⁴¹ And again: "He who bases himself on tradition ... is not hindered by logical arguments."⁴² His grammatical writing represents a change of attitude which Madhav Deshpande (1998, p. 20), from the University of Michigan, does not hesitate to characterize as a paradigm shift. Unlike his main predecessors, who lived a number of centuries earlier, with Bhartṛhari "an entirely new tone has set in. There is a strong feeling that the current times are decadent, and that there are no truly authoritative persons around. Grammarians in this decadent period must look back to the golden age of the great ancient grammarians and seek authority in their statements."

One might be tempted to accuse Bhartṛhari of using the philosophical debate of his time to try to gain respectability for the Vedic tradition to which he belonged, and one might very well be right in this. Let us not forget that philosophical debate during the first half of the first millennium was almost totally confined to Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, and a number of Buddhist schools. None of these schools had any direct link with the Vedic textual corpus or with its ritual traditions. The opposition of Sāṃkhya to the Vedic tradition is testified to by texts from various periods, some as old as the *Mahābhārata*, others much younger.⁴³ And the early texts of Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika—although later categorized as orthodox, that is, "Vedic"—show little evidence of having any particular link with Vedic texts and rites;⁴⁴ the evidence we have points rather to a link with the worship of Śiva.⁴⁵

The most orthodox schools of philosophy are, of course, Pūrva- and Uttara-Mīmāṃsā. The former does not really join the philosophical debate until Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, one or two centuries after Bhartṛhari. The latter, better known by the name Vedānta (or Vedāntism), is conspicuous by its absence in listings of philosophical

schools during this early period. This does not necessarily mean that there were no Vedāntins during the early centuries of the first millennium,⁴⁶ but it does strongly suggest that they did not yet participate in the philosophical debate, that they did not yet expose, and improve, their positions in the light of criticism received (and perhaps even solicited) from others. Bhartṛhari may have been one of the first truly "Vedic" philosophers. He joined the philosophical debate, took up the challenges that occupied the other thinkers of his time, and constructed a system that gave a place of honor to the Veda and to the way of life it represented to its followers. Indeed, Bhartṛhari maintains that the world has been created in accordance with the Veda, including the Vedic injunctions. Correct Brahmanical behavior is therefore anchored in the nature of the world itself, no less than the song of the cuckoo.

Bhartṛhari did not take his task lightly. In his effort to find a place for the Veda in the philosophical debate of his time, he read everything he could lay his hands on, and borrowed elements from practically all his sources (without acknowledgments, unfortunately). Vaiśeṣika elements are particularly abundant, and Buddhist elements are important, but scholars have also traced elements from Sāṃkhya and even from Jainism in Bhartṛhari's work. No doubt from Buddhist sources Bhartṛhari took the idea that the phenomenal world is not ultimately real. This allowed him to postulate a highest reality, which on one occasion he calls Brahman. He might in this way have claimed highest reality for the Vedic tradition and left ordinary reality (which is ultimately unreal) to the various philosophical schools that existed in his day. But he did not do so. He accepts the relative validity of those schools of thought in the realm of the phenomenal world (this is his perspectivism), but adds an important element of his own: phenomenal reality is determined by the Veda. The Veda is its creator (or organizer), and this means, in the end, that only the Vedic Brahmins know its nature and are really in a position to influence it. Seen in this way, Bhartṛhari's ideas on language and reality, and on the relationship between these two, are really the result of a Brahmanical twist given to ideas that had been around for a while.

Notes

This essay, initially foreseen to be a lecture only, draws heavily on material which I have published elsewhere and that is brought together in my article "Sanskrit and Reality: The Buddhist Contribution" (Bronkhorst 1996b).

In the Notes, the abbreviation *Vkp* is used for the Wilhelm Rau edition of the *Vākyapadīya* by Bhartṛhari. See Rau 1977 in the References section below. *WI* refers to the *Word Index to the Prāśastapādabhāṣya* by Johannes Bronkhorst and Yves Ramseier (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994).

1 – The results of this investigation have now come out in a small monograph, *Langage et réalité*. See Bronkhorst 1999 below.

2 – *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 7.17: *yadi kaścid anutpanno bhāvaḥ saṃvidyate kvacit / utpadyeta sa kiṃ tasmin bhāve utpadyate 'sati* // (Nāgārjuna 1977).

- 3 – Vkp 3.3.43cd: *yadi saj jāyate 'kasmād athāsaj jāyate katham.*
- 4 – Vkp 3.3.39: *vyapadeśe padārthānām anyā sattaupacārikā / sarvāvasthāsu sarveṣām ātmārūpasya darśikā //*
- 5 – Vkp 1.52: *āṇḍabhāvam ivāpanno yaḥ kratuḥ śabdasaṃjñakāḥ / vṛttis tasya kriyārūpā bhāgaśo bhajate kramam //* The Vṛtti explains: ... *bāhyo vyāvahārikāḥ śabdo 'ntaḥkaraṇe mayūrādyaṇḍarasavat ... pratilīyate.*
- 6 – Vkp 3.6.15ab: *nirbhāgātmakatā tulyā paramāṇor ghaṭasya ca.*
- 7 – Vkp 3.1.32ab: *satyāsatyau tu yau bhāgau pratibhāvaṃ vyavasthitau.* Cf. Bronkhorst 1991, pp. 12–13.
- 8 – Vkp 3.3.72: *yatra draṣṭā ca dṛśyaṃ ca darśanaṃ cāvikalpitaṃ / tasyaivārthasya satyatvaṃ śrītās trayantavedināḥ //*
- 9 – Vkp 3.6.25: *vikalpātītattatveṣu saṃketopanibandhanāḥ / bhāveṣu vyavahārā ye lokas tatrānugamyate //*
- 10 – Vkp 3.7.41: *dyauḥ kṣamā vāyur ādityaḥ sāgarāḥ sarito diśaḥ / antaḥkaraṇatattvasya bhāgā bahir avasthitāḥ //*
- 11 – Vkp 1.133cd: *tadvaśād abhiniṣpannaṃ sarvaṃ vastu vibhajyate.* Tad- refers back to *vāgrūpatā avabodhasya* in verse 132.
- 12 – Vkp 1.13ab: *arthapravṛttitattvānām śabdā eva nibandhanam.*
- 13 – Vkp 1.171cd: *svabhāvajñais tu bhāvanām dṛśyante śabdaśaktayaḥ.*
- 14 – Vkp 1.122–23: *śabdeṣv evāśrītā śaktir viśvasyāsyā nibandhanā / ... śaḍjā dibhedāḥ śabdena vyākhyāto rūpyate yataḥ / tasmād arthavidhāḥ sarvāḥ śabdāmātrāsu niśrītāḥ //* On the exact reading of this verse, see Bronkhorst 1988, p. 124.
- 15 – Vkp 1.142: *atyantam atathābhūte nimitte śrutyapāśrayāt / dṛśyate 'lātacakrādau vastvākāranirūpaṇā //* (trans. Houben).
- 16 – Vkp 1.131: *na so 'sti pratyayo loke yaḥ śabdānugamād ṛte / anuviddham ivā jñānaṃ sarvaṃ śabdena bhāsatē //*
- 17 – Vkp 3.14.198ab: *śabdād arthāḥ pratāyante sa bhedānām vidhāyakaḥ.*
- 18 – Bhartṛhari, *Mahābhāṣyadīpikā* (Manuscript, p. 11a.1.1; “Critical Edition” *Āhnika* I, p. 28, 1.8–9; ed. Abhyankar-Limaye, p. 33, 1.24–p. 34, 1.1; ed. Swaminathan, p. 40, 1.11): *tatra yathaiva svargāpūrvadevatāśabdā upalabhyamānā atyantāparidṛṣṭānām arthānām astitvānumānam.* ... Bhavya's *Madhya-makahṛdayakārikā* 9.5 ascribes to a “Mīmāṃsaka” the position according to which the existence of such objects is known from the Veda; see Kawasaki 1976, pp. 6–7.
- 19 – Vkp 2.119: *asty arthaḥ sarvaśabdānām iti pratyāyikalakṣaṇam / apūrvadevatāsvargaiḥ samam āhur gavādiṣu //*
- 20 – See Houben 1995.
- 21 – Vkp 1.10: *vidhātus tasya lokānām aṅgopāṅganibandhanāḥ / vidyābhedāḥ pratāyante jñānasamskārahetavaḥ //* Halbfass translates *vidhātṛ* as “organizing principle” (1991a, p. 5) or “Organisationsprinzip” (1991b, p. 126).
- 22 – Vkp 1.124: *śabdasya pariṇāmo 'yam ity āmnāyavido viduḥ / chandobhya eva prathamam etad viśvaṃ pravartate //*
- 23 – Vkp 1.7: *smṛtayo bahurūpāś ca dṛṣṭādrṣṭaprayojanāḥ / tam evāśritya liṅgebhyo vedavidbhiḥ prakalpitaḥ //*
- 24 – Vkp 1.149: *astaṃ yāteṣu vādeṣu kartṛṣv anyeṣv asatsv api / śrūtismṛtyuditaṃ dharmam loko na vyativartate //*
- 25 – Vkp 1.129: *itikartavyatā loke sarvā śabdavyapāśrayā / yām pūrvāhitasamskāro bālo 'pi pratipadyate //*
- 26 – Vkp 2.146: *sākṣāc chabdena janitām bhāvanānugamena vā / itikartavyatāyām tām na kaścid ativartate //*
- 27 – Vkp 2.147cd and 149–150: *saṃārambhāḥ pratāyante tiraścām api tadvaśāt //* ... *svaravṛttim vikurute madhau puṃskokilasya kaḥ / jantvādayaḥ kulāyādi-karaṇe śikṣitāḥ katham //* *āhārapṛityapadveṣapavanādikriyāsu kaḥ / jātyan-vayaprasiddhāsu prayoktā mṛgapakṣiṇām //*
- 28 – Biarreau 1964, pp. 317–318; Subramania Iyer 1977, p. 62.
- 29 – One is reminded, of course, of the *abhilāpavāsanā* of the Yogācāras, which is responsible for a number of percepts (*vijñapti*) besides the one of linguistic usage (*vyavahāravijñapti*). Cf. Lamotte 1973, pp. 88–89, 108 (= *Mahāyānasamgraha* II.2, II.16).
- 30 – The commentator Puṇyārāja explains: the tradition is sometimes acquired in this life, sometimes in another life.
- 31 – Vkp 2.151–52: *bhāvanānugatād etad āgamād eva jāyate / āsattiviprakaṣābhyaṃ āgamas tu viśiṣyate //* *svabhāvacaraṇābhyāsayogaḍṛṣṭopapāditām / viśiṣṭopahitām ceti pratibhāṃ śaḍvidhām viduḥ //* The reading *carāṇa* instead of *varaṇa* is here accepted, with Rau's hyparchetype *n* and the Vṛtti.
- 32 – Vkp 1.150ab: *jñāne svābhāvike nārthaḥ śāstraiḥ kaścana vidyate.*
- 33 – Vkp 1.40: *idaṃ puṇyam idaṃ pāpam ity etasmin padadvaye / ācaṇḍālamānu-ṣyānām alpam śāstraprayojanam //* This verse belongs to the Vṛtti according to Aklujkar 1971, p. 512.
- 34 – Vkp 1.130: *ādayaḥ karaṇavinyāsaḥ prāṇasyordhvaṃ samīraṇam / sthānānām abhigḥātāś ca na vinā śabdabhāvanām //*
- 35 – Vkp 2.116: *avikalpitaṃ vākyārthe vikalpā bhāvanāśrayāḥ.*
- 36 – Vkp 1.155–156: *rūpādayo yathā dṛṣṭāḥ pratyartham yataśaktayaḥ / śabdās tathaiva dṛśyante viśāpaharaṇādiṣu //* *yathaiṣām tatra sāmānyam dharme 'py*

evam prafīyatām / sādḥūnām sādhubhis tasmad vacyam abhyudayaṁnam // (trans. Houben).

- 37 – Vkp 1.27: *śiṣṭebhya āgamāt siddhāḥ sādḥavo dharmasāadhanam / arthapratyāyanābhede viparītās tv asādhavaḥ* // (trans. Houben).
- 38 – Patañjali 1880–1885, vol. 1, p. 11, 1.1–2; p. 366, 1.12–13: *śabdapramāṇakavayam / yac chabda āha tad asmākaṁ pramāṇam* /
- 39 – Śābara Bhāṣya 3.1.36 (p. 184); cf. 6.1.3 (p. 183), 6.2.6 (p. 228), 10.5.73 (p. 431).
- 40 – Vkp 3.7.38cd: *śabdapramāṇako lokāḥ sa śāstreṇānugamyate*.
- 41 – Vkp 1.30: *na cāgamād ṛte dharmas tarkeṇa vyavatiṣṭhate / ṛṣiṇām api yajñānam tad apy āgamapūrvakam* //
- 42 – Vkp 1.41: *caitanyaṁ iva yaś cāyam avicchēdēna vartate / āgas tam upāśīṇa hetuvādair na bādhyate* //
- 43 – Cf. the passage in the *Mahābhārata* (12.260–262) that records a discussion between Kapila, the supernatural “founder” of Sāṁkhya, and the Vedic ṛṣi Syūmarāśmi. Syūmarāśmi rejects the possibility of liberation and exhorts to action; Kapila preaches liberation through restraint and abstention from activity. A late example is Guṇaratnasūri’s *Tarkarāhasyadīpikā* on Haribhadra’s *Śaddarśanasamuccaya* (fourteenth century), which states the following about the Sāṁkhyas (Jain 1969, p. 141): “They are numerous in Vārāṇasī. Many Brahmins, fasting for a month, follow the way of smoke which is opposed to the way of light. But the Sāṁkhyas follow the way of light. For that very reason the Brahmins, to whom the Veda is dear, follow the way of sacrifice. The Sāṁkhyas, on the other hand, turning away from the Veda which is rich in violence, proclaim the self” (*vārāṇasyāṁ teṣāṁ prācuryam / bahavo māso pavāsikā brāhmaṇā arcirmārgaviruddhadhūmamārgānugāmināḥ / sāmṁkhyās tu arcirmārgānugāḥ / tata eva brāhmaṇā vedapriyā yajñamārgānugāḥ / sāmṁkhyas tu himsādhyaavedaviratā adhyātmavādināḥ*).
- 44 – Here one could draw attention to the “proof” in the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* of the existence of seers (*ṛṣi*) responsible for the composition of the Veda (*Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* 6.1.1–2; see Jambuvijaya 1982 and Wezler 1985), as well as to the occurrence, still in *Praśastapāda’s Padārthadharmaśaṅgraha*, of Vedic cosmographical concepts (*varuṇaloka*, “the world of Varuṇa”; *ādityaloka*, “the world of Āditya”; and *marutām loka*, “the world of the Maruts.” See WI under these expressions). These or related terms occur in the Vedic *Brāhmaṇas* (see Kifer 1920, pp. 5–6), a few times in the *Mahābhārata* (Sörensen 1904, s.v. *Varuṇaloka*, *Vāyuloka*), but apparently only rarely, some of them perhaps not at all, in the later Purāṇic literature. The *Padārthadharmaśaṅgraha* does use Purāṇic, that is, non-Vedic, material in the context of God’s creation of the world, but this appears to be new material brought into the school by *Praśastapāda* himself (Bronkhorst 1996a).

45 – A number of thinkers of the “old” school of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika—viz. *Praśastapāda* (probably), *Uddyotakara*, *Bhāsarvajña*, and *Vādi Vāgiśvara*—were *Sāivites*, or, more specifically, *Pāśupatas*. See Bronkhorst 1996a (*Praśastapāda*); the final colophon of the *Nyāyavārttika* (*Uddyotakara*); Ingalls 1962, p. 284; Raghavan 1942 (*Vādi Vāgiśvara*); and Sarma 1934 (*Bhāsarvajña*). The Jaina doxographer *Haribhadra*, in his *Śaddarśanasamuccaya*, attributes the *devatā Śiva* to the adherents of Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika (Qvarnström 1999, p. 181).

46 – When, for example, *Kālidāsa* (*Vikramorvaśīya* 1.1) states *vedānteṣu yam āhur ekapuruṣam*, he refers to the Upaniṣads, but by doing so he may reveal the existence of people who looked upon the Upaniṣads with reverence.

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