

# The Relevance of Sâmkhya Metaphysics to Yoga Meditation

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## Introduction

In this paper I will argue that there are three main ways in which the metaphysical schema of classical Sâmkhya can be interpreted, and that one of them is to be preferred over the other two on the grounds that it is (a) the least internally incoherent, and (b) the most soteriologically congruent with classical Yoga.

I will call the three ways of interpreting Sâmkhya metaphysics: (1) the Cosmological Model; (2) the Psychological Model; and (3) the Experience Model. Standard interpretations typically try to combine the Cosmological with the Psychological Model, and end up being both incoherent and soteriologically incongruent with Yoga, whereas the Experience Model largely avoids these faults.

It needs to be pointed out that there are two major premises that I will not be concerned to argue for in this paper, but which I do not consider to be especially controversial.

The first of these is that classical Sâmkhya and Yoga are complementary systems (or *darshanas*). By 'complementary' I mean principally 'soteriologically congruent'; and, by 'soteriologically congruent', I mean that they share the same salvific goal and broadly the same soteric methodology. Given that it is often assumed that Sâmkhya is more 'rationalistic' and less experience-based than Yoga, my claim that the two systems share broadly the same methodology is a little controversial; however, if my attempt to vindicate the Experience Model of Sâmkhya metaphysics is successful, then the 'rationalistic' assumption will have been largely undermined.

The second implicit premise is that we should adopt the Exegetical Principle of Charity. This principle has been neatly expressed by the analytic pragmatist philosopher W. V. O. Quine in the following remark: 'The more absurd the doctrine attributed to someone, *ceteris paribus*, the less the likelihood that we have well construed his words.' Applied to our present context, I maintain that, if two or more mutually incompatible interpretations are available of Sâmkhya and Yoga – and of Sâmkhya metaphysics in particular – then we ought, other things being equal, to prefer the least incoherent interpretation.

## 1. The Standard Interpretation of Sâmkhya Metaphysics

Let us begin, then, by taking a look at the Sâmkhya metaphysical schema, and at the way it is standardly interpreted. The schema comprises twenty-five categories or

principles and is presented in roughly the middle portion of the *Sâmkhyakârikâ*, which is attributed to Īshvarakrishna and dated around the fourth century C.E.

According to the standard interpretation, the first two principles – *purusha* and *prakriti* – are irreducible cosmic substances, *purusha* being spiritual and *prakriti* being material. Despite this fundamental ontological difference, the two principles are in beginningless ‘conjunction’ (*samyoga*), which conjunction unsettles the threefold, or three-stranded (*traigunya*), constitution of *prakriti* in such a way as to produce a succession of twenty-three further principles. Whereas *purusha* and *prakriti* are ‘unmanifest’ (*avyakta*), this series of twenty-three is ‘manifest’ (*vyakta*).

One of the sources of puzzlement with respect to Sâmkhya metaphysics is the question what sorts of entities the twenty-three manifest principles are. Most interpreters maintain that their sequential emergence amounts to a cosmogony – that is, an account of how the universe came into existence. The main difficulty with this interpretation is that at least the majority of the principles appear, from their classical names and definitions, to be psychological entities, not cosmological ones.

There are three standard ways of responding to this difficulty: one is to ignore it; a second is to acknowledge it and to declare that it remains a puzzle; and the third is to claim that there must be *two sets* of manifest principles – a psychological set and a cosmological set. The first two of these responses are obliged to accept incoherence: they affirm the Cosmological and the Psychological Model simultaneously. The third option was favoured by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in his 1927 book *Indian Philosophy*, and is partially endorsed by, for example, Ian Whicher in his book on classical Yoga. Ian stresses that the psychological set arises as a consequence of an epistemic error, namely the misapprehension that a conjunction obtains between *purusha* and the set of cosmological principles when in fact that conjunction does not obtain. On my view, however, the positing of two distinct sets of principles is an ontologically unparsimonious manoeuvre, for which there is no textual basis.

## 2. The Soteriological Congruity of Sâmkhya Metaphysics

It would appear, then, that none of the standard responses to the question concerning the nature of the manifest principles is exegetically satisfactory. This initial problem then generates the further one of coherently placing the metaphysical schema within the overall soteriological enterprise of Sâmkhya and Yoga. This second problem is highlighted by Gerald Larson, who notes in his book on classical Sâmkhya that:

[...] the [Sâmkhya] theory of evolution has very little to do with the problem of salvation, since in any given life, evolution is already accomplished before that particular life begins [...]. Clearly the exposition of the *Sâmkhyakârikâ* on this point leaves much to be desired.

These remarks again echo Radhakrishnan, who lamented that:

It is difficult to understand the precise significance of the Sâmkhya account of evolution, and we have not seen any satisfactory explanation as to why the different steps of evolution are what they are.

The problem, then, seems to be this. The salvific goal of Sâmkhya and Yoga consists in the establishment of each individual person's spiritual self (*purusha*) in its own nature (*svarûpa*), a state of self-absorption or 'aloneness' (*kaivalya*). In order to attain this goal, each individual must undergo a sustained withdrawal of misidentification – that is, of a projected conception of selfhood – from everything that is numerically and qualitatively non-identical with *purusha*. So far, so good. Given this goal, there does seem to be some plausible motivation for Sâmkhya's giving a comprehensive account of those things with which *purusha* is non-identical. What remains perplexing, however, is, as Radhakrishnan puts it, 'why the different steps of evolution are what they are.'

Thus we are now confronted with two big and awkward exegetical questions: Firstly, what is the nature of the Sâmkhyan metaphysical principles; and, secondly, what has their order of emergence got to do with the salvific enterprise?

### 3. The Experience Model of Sâmkhya Metaphysics

According to the Cosmological Model, Sâmkhya metaphysics is a response to the question of how, and in what order, the fundamental constituents of the universe came into existence. According to the Psychological Model, meanwhile, it is a response to the question of how, and in what order, the fundamental constituents of each psychological person came into existence. It is, then, hardly surprising that the interpretations get very messy when the metaphysical schema is taken to be responding to both of these questions at once.

My proposal is that we reject both the Cosmological and the Psychological Model. Instead, we should treat Sâmkhya metaphysics as a response to the question, not of how the universe or the psychological person came into existence, but of how *conscious experience* comes into existence. To be more precise, I am proposing that we treat the schema as a synchronic account of the general constituents of possible experience, and not as a diachronic creation story at all, whether cosmologically or psychologically construed.

This Experience Model has the dual advantage of being highly theoretically coherent (without being either unparsimonious or textually ungrounded) and of suggesting a plausible explanation for the order in which the Sâmkhya principles are presented.

In the space available I will not be able to give a full run-through of the Experience Model and its implications. Instead, I shall give an indicative example. Let us consider the five principles collectively termed the *bhûtâni*. These are the last in the series of principles to be presented in the Sâmkhya schema. Although they are not individually named in the *Sâmkhyakârikâ* itself, traditional commentators universally take them to be the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and *âkâsha* (this last one being translatable as 'space'). Modern interpreters typically construe these as being five varieties of physical atom, with *âkâsha* being some sort of 'proto-atom'.

Both the Cosmological and the Psychological Model have trouble explaining how physical atoms can 'emerge' or 'evolve' from ostensibly mental entities; and thus interpreters frequently resort to applying the opaque concept of 'subtle matter' to the non-physical principles. The Experience Model, however, has no need to invoke such opaque concepts in order to account for the bhûtas' ontological continuity with the other manifest principles, since there is a perfectly plausible way of interpreting them in phenomenological terms. This phenomenological interpretation will be familiar to anyone who has studied Abhidharma Buddhist taxonomies of mental phenomena. In such taxonomies 'earth' is typically taken to stand for solidity or hardness, 'water' for liquidity, 'fire' for luminosity, and 'air' for gaseousness, each of these qualities being the respective quality *as experienced by a subject*.

What I am claiming, then, is that the bhûtas, or so-called 'gross elements', can be integrated far more coherently into Sâmkhya's overall metaphysical schema if they are construed, as in Abhidharma, as constitutive qualities of experience than they can if taken to be mind-independent physical entities. And I am claiming, further, that each of Sâmkhya's other manifest principles ought also to be regarded as a type of constituent of experience.

#### **4. The Relevance to Yoga Meditation**

The relevance of Sâmkhya metaphysics to Yoga meditation is that it presents a systematic and reasonably comprehensive account of the general constituents of experience. It is best understood, in my view, not as a speculative metaphysics of a subject-independent reality, but as a descriptive metaphysics of experience.

Yoga meditation is a practice that, in large part, consists in paying close and sustained attention to one's own experience, mentally noting whatever presents itself, and noting further that, insofar as anything does present itself, that thing cannot be identical with the ultimate seer or subject of consciousness (*drashtri, purusha*). Sâmkhya metaphysics adumbrates the major categories of experiential contents that are to be disidentified with, thereby furnishing the Yoga practitioner with a model with which to compare her own phenomenological observations. I maintain that this relevance is obscured when Sâmkhya metaphysics is interpreted according to the Cosmological and Psychological models, and that for this reason (in addition to its internal coherence) the Experience Model ought to be preferred.

#### **Primary Sources and Abbreviations**

**(Secondary sources are given in the Notes)**

***Gaudapâdabhâshya of Gaudapâda (GBh)***

Mainkar, T. G. (trans.) (1972) *Sâmkhyakârikâ of Îshvarakrishna, with the Commentary of Gaudapâda*, 2nd edn, Poona: Oriental Book Agency.

### ***Sâmkhyakârikâ of Îshvarakrishna (SK)***

Larson, G. J. (trans.) (1979) 'The *Sâmkhyakârikâ* of Îshvarakrishna', in *Classical Sâmkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning*, 2nd edn, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, App. B, pp. 255–77.

### ***Tattvakaumudî of Vâcaspatimishra***

Jhâ, G. (trans.) (1896) *Tattva-kaumudî of Vâcaspati Mishra*, Bombay: Tookaram Tatya.

### ***Yogasûtra of Patañjali***

Feuerstein, Georg (1989) *The Yoga-Sûtra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary*, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions India.

### ***Yuktidîpikâ***

Kumar, S., and D. N. Bhargava (trans.) (1990) *Yuktidîpikâ*, 2 vols, Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers.

### Notes

Quine, 'Reply to Chomsky', in D. Davidson and J. Hintikka (eds) *Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W. V. O. Quine*, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969, p. 304.

This succession is broached at SK 22, which reads: 'From prakriti [comes] the great (*mahañ*); from that, egoity (*ahankâra*); and from that, the group of sixteen; again, from five of those sixteen, [come] the five elements (*bhûtas*).' The 'group of sixteen' comprises *manas*, the five *buddhîndriyas*, plus the five *karmendriyas*; and the principles that give rise to the five 'elements' are the five *tanmâtras*.

'Buddhi, as the product of prakriti and the generator of ahankâra, is different from buddhi which controls the processes of the senses, mind and ahankâra. If the former is identified with the latter, the whole evolution of prakriti must be regarded as subjective, since the ego and the non-ego are both the products of buddhi. This ambiguity is found

in the other products of prakṛti also' (Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2 vols, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927, II, p. 268).

'The notion of mistaken identity or misidentification with *buddhi* and *ahamkāra* makes it easy to understand how these *tattvas* can be depicted as both cosmic and psychological, for it is the very false identification that turns the cosmic into the psychological' (Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998, p. 71).

Gerald J. Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning*, 2nd edn, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, p. 196.

*Indian Philosophy*, II, p. 274.

Reference to *svarūpa* is made at YS 1.3; for references to *kaivalya*, see e.g. YS 2.25, 4.34, and SK 68.

I should note that my proposal is not entirely novel. The most notable forerunner is Jajneswar Ghosh, who contended back in the 1930s that Sāṃkhya's world is 'the world of experience, as it [i.e. Sāṃkhya] knows nothing of any world or system of objects and events existing in independence of consciousness' (Ghosh, Introduction, in Swāmī H. Āraṇya, *The Sāṃkhya-sūtras of Pañcasikha and the Sāṃkhyatattvāloka*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977, pp. 1–86, at p. 3). He describes Sāṃkhya's methodology as one of 'analytic reflection' which 'is brought to bear primarily on the contents of consciousness' and which involves 'no great leap from thought to things in themselves,' that is, no commitment to the existence of empirical objects independently of experience itself (p. 4).

The relevant Sanskrit terms are: *prithivī* or *kṣhiti* (earth), *ap* (water), *tejas* (fire), and *vāyu* or *marut* (air). A synonym of *ākāśa* is *vyoman*, which is normally translated these days as 'space' (the older translation as 'ether' having fallen out of favour). For references to these five elements, see the traditional commentaries on SK 38, e.g. *TK*, *GBh*, and *YD*.

'All gross things are formed by the collocation of the five atoms of *kṣhiti*, *ap*, *tejas*, *marut*, and *vyoman*. The difference between one thing and another is simply this, that its collocation of atoms or the arrangement or grouping of atoms is different from that in another' (Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922, p. 255).

'Ākāśa corresponds in some respects to the ether of the physicists and in others to what may be called proto-atom (protyle)' (B. N. Seal, quoted in Dasgupta, *A History*, vol. 1, p. 253 n.1).

The following passage from Sen Gupta vividly illustrates how freely some interpreters apply the notion of 'subtlety': 'According to Sāṃkhya, the evolutionary change means gradual change from more subtle to less subtle. *Prakṛiti* is the subtlest of all the constitutive principles of the world. So, the first evolute should be such which is less subtle than *Prakṛiti* but more subtle than the succeeding categories. This is possible only if *sattva guṇa* becomes the predominating *guṇa* in the first category. (Subtlety can be

generated in a category merely by increasing the *sattva guna*)' (Anima Sen Gupta, *Classical Sâmkhya: A Critical Study*, 2nd edn, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1982, p. 98).

Cf. Herbert Guenther: "Earth" is the symbolic expression for all that is solid and able to carry a load, "water" for all that is fluid and cohesive, "fire" for all that is light and moving' (H. V. Guenther, Herbert V. (1974) *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, 2nd edn, Berkeley, CA: Shambhala, 1974, p. 146). And add to this Rupert Gethin's remark, that 'What is clear [...] is the extent to which the early Buddhist account of rûpa [the collective term for the mahâbh ûtas] focusses on the physical world as experienced by a sentient being – the terms of reference are decidedly body-endowed-with-consciousness (*saviññânaka kâya*)' (R. M. Gethin, 'The Five *Khandhas*: Their Treatment in the *Nikâyas* and Early *Abhidhamma*', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1986), pp. 35–53, at p. 36, my square brackets).

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