

Vṛṣabhadeva's *Sphuṭākṣarā* on Bhartṛhari's metaphysics: commentarial strategy and new interpretations

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Abstract

Although somewhat neglected in the scholarly debate, Vṛṣabhadeva's commentary (known as *Sphuṭākṣarā* or *Paddhati*, possibly 8th c. CE) on *Vākyapadīya*'s first chapter, offers a remarkable analysis of Bhartṛhari's views on metaphysics and philosophy of language. *Vākyapadīya*'s first four *kārikās* deals with ontological issues, defining the key elements of Bhartṛhari's non-dualistic edifice such as the properties of the unitary principle, its powers, the role of time and the ontological status of worldly objects. Vṛṣabhadeva's interpretation of the *kārikās* in question is intriguing and seems to be guided by the urgency to find a solution to the riddle which every non-dualistic theory has to face: how is it possible to postulate a unitary principle of reality when reality is cognized as multiple? In accomplishing the task Vṛṣabhadeva proposes various solutions (some of which are based on concepts which are hardly detectable in *Vākyapadīya* and appear close to the ones propounded in certain trends of Advaita Vedānta), finally suggesting an explanation which, being based on the pragmatic aspect of language, is altogether consistent with Bhartṛhari's theoretical picture.

Keywords

Bhartṛhari, Vṛṣabhadeva, philosophy of language, ontology, *Vākyapadīya*, *Sphuṭākṣarā*

Introduction

This article is the initial outcome of an ongoing project aimed at investigating the figure of Vṛṣabhadeva (or Śrīvṛṣabha, possibly 8th c. CE) and the contributions contained in his only extant work, the *Sphuṭākṣarā* or *Paddhati*, a commentary on the first chapter of Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* (5th c. CE, hereinafter VP). The project focuses on the translation and analysis of the first portion of the work, devoted to metaphysical issues. In accomplishing this task, I have relied on the current edition of the text (see below), supplemented by a critical reading of one of the four available manuscripts.¹

Among the ancient commentaries of VP, Vṛṣabhadeva's is certainly the one that has received least attention from scholars. All the other available sources – the *Vṛtti*, Puṇyarāja's *ṭīkā* and Helārāja's *prakāśa* – have raised greater interest, each for different reasons. The *Vṛtti* – the oldest commentary, traditionally attributed to Bhartṛhari – has dominated scholarly debate over the past decades: the issue of its authorship has been painstakingly discussed (without any definitive evidence) from 1964 to the present day.² By contrast, Puṇyarāja's and Helārāja's commentaries, although probably much later (Iyer 1969: 36-44), enjoy a special status. Indeed, they are the only tools that explicate the second and third chapters of VP which, in the *Vṛtti*, are either badly preserved or totally lacking. As compared to the other works, the *Sphuṭākṣarā* seems to suffer from two major drawbacks. First, covering only the *kārikās* of the first *kāṇḍa* and the *Vṛtti* thereon, it comments a section of the original text already examined by the *Vṛtti* itself. Moreover, it is structured as a word-by-word commentary whose tone may sometimes

¹ All following quotations from the *Sphuṭākṣarā* refer to S. Iyer's edition and are identified by page and line number. The manuscript in question belongs to the Government Oriental Manuscript Library, Chennai, catalogue number 2789. See IYER 1966: ix for further information.

² The debate on the authorship of the *Vṛtti* has a long history and is still unsettled. For further information, see Biarreau 1964, Iyer 1969, Aklujkar 1972, Bronkhorst 1988, Houben 1997.

appear humble and unpretentious.³ This may be the reason that has led scholars constantly to understate Vṛṣabhadeva's contributions and to consider his text simply as a further aid, a sort of last resort in understanding some intricate passages of the *kārikās* and the *Vṛtti*.

The purpose of this article is to show how this perspective can mislead and to corroborate A. Aklujkar's statement that "although Vṛṣabhadeva's commentary is simple in wording, it displays much well-digested and well-concealed learning" (Aklujkar 1993:30). This first essay focuses on the commentarial strategy employed by the author. The section taken into account covers the first four stanzas of VP. I shall show how Vṛṣabhadeva develops a specific analysis of their content, identifying one central problem, highlighting the key passages of Bhartṛhari's theory and offering his own answers to the most controversial questions. This method is not unknown in the philosophical literature of early India, yet the way Vṛṣabhadeva blends his own views with the ideas contained in the *mūla* texts is subtle, absolutely "well-concealed" and consistent with a perceptive theoretical plan.⁴

But before proceeding, we must recollect some basic facts concerning the textual condition of the *Sphuṭākṣarā* and its author.

1. The *Sphuṭākṣarā* and Vṛṣabhadeva

The title of the *Sphuṭākṣarā* is open to question, as is the date of its author. Both issues can be addressed by looking at the *maṅgalaśloka*s at the beginning of the work.

The *Sphuṭākṣarā* is commonly known as *Paddhati*, a Sanskrit word whose basic meaning is "footpath" or "path"; more commonly it indicates a literary work intended to help the reader to do or understand something and is usually translated as "manual". This ambiguity of meaning is fully exploited by Vṛṣabhadeva in describing the work:

paddhatir eṣā vākyapadīyodadheḥ sugamā (p. 1, l. 9)

This *paddhati* is an easy introduction to the ocean of VP.

³ The impression of lack of sophistication is somehow prompted by Vṛṣabhadeva himself. In the *maṅgalaśloka*s he defines his own work as an "easy introduction to the ocean of VP". See p. 1, l. 9. Nonetheless this attitude of deprecating one's own contribution is rather frequent among classical commentators and is not peculiar to Vṛṣabhadeva.

⁴ On the complex relation between commentaries and original texts, see Torella 2011: 173-179.

The term *paddhati* indicates here both a “manual” for a better understanding of VP and a “path” through the vastness of the *mūla*. Yet, although it aptly characterizes the literary genre of the work, *paddhati* is not the name of the text. In fact, the actual title is stated in the preceding verse with an eloquent:

sphuṭākṣarānāma (em.; Ed: *sphuṭākṣaraṃ nāma*) (p. 1, l. 8).

That goes by the name of *Sphuṭākṣarā*.

Consequently, although the generic denomination *Paddhati* is acceptable, *Sphuṭākṣarā* is to be preferred to indicate Vṛṣabhadeva’s commentary.⁵

Establishing a date for Vṛṣabhadeva is more complex. The scarce biographical data at our disposal may, once again, be implied by the dedicatory verses, in which Vṛṣabhadeva affirms he is the son of Devayaśas, and a servant of King Viṣṇugupta:

*vimalacaritasya rājño viduṣaḥ śrīviṣṇuguptadevasya/
bhṛtyena tadanubhāvāc chrīdevayaśastanūjena*|(p.1, ll. 3-4)

“[A work composed by Śrīvṛṣabha] – youngest son of the honourable Devayaśas – and officer, by virtue of [the king’s] authority, of the honourable Viṣṇugupta, a learned sovereign of unblemished behaviour.

Any effort to date Vṛṣabhadeva has to involve identification of the king just mentioned. On this point, as early as 1969, Subramania Iyer put forward the two most reliable alternatives (Iyer 1969:44-45): the name Viṣṇugupta must refer either to the well known 6th c. CE Gupta emperor or to an obscure ruler of Magadha who lived in the first half of the 8th c. CE (Gupta 1974; Sinha 1977). Choosing which of the two kings best fits the picture is hard. Iyer notes that to accept the earlier date would involve too short a gap between Bhartṛhari (the date established for him by Frauwallner – late 5th c. CE – has never been disputed) and Vṛṣabhadeva. Hence for Iyer the later date is to be preferred: a reasonable conclusion that needs no further discussion here.

Conversely, a review of the philological history of *Sphuṭākṣarā* is fairly straightforward. An edition of the text was twice attempted in the 20th century. The first was by Charudeva Sastri,

⁵ Vṛṣabhadeva’s work is usually cited as *Paddhati*, although in some publications *Sphuṭākṣarā* is also used. See, for instance, AKLUJKAR 1983: xv.

who merely published some excerpts of the work – together with the *kārikās* and the *Vṛtti* – presenting it as an “abridgment of Vṛṣabhadeva’s *īkā*” (Sastri 1934). The second attempt was by Subramania Iyer, who published a more substantial edition in 1966, once again as a sub-commentary of the *kārikās* and the *Vṛtti*. In this second case the work is presented in its entirety, but the text is far from being definitive,⁶ containing several corrupted passages and lacunae. Although a new edition of the *Sphuṭākṣarā* is badly needed, Iyer’s has certainly the merit of providing a mostly readable text. All the following considerations are thus based on the 1966 text, with a few corrections where needed.

2. The Metaphysics of Brahman

The opening section of VP is devoted to analysing the most crucial item of Bhartṛhari's metaphysics. As Bhartṛhari is a non-dualist and a *vedāntin*,⁷ the name used to indicate it is *Brahman*.⁸ The author expounds the most important features of Brahman right at the beginning of the work, in a relatively small portion, corresponding to the first four *kārikās*, which is worth briefly recalling. The well-known first stanza of VP provides a rapid but exhaustive view of Bhartṛhari's philosophical programme, highlighting the centrality of Brahman, its lack of limitation of any kind,⁹ its being the cause of reality¹⁰ and, above all, its linguistic nature.¹¹ Brahman is without beginning and end; it is the cause of all phenomena and, being endowed with specific powers, it is capable of becoming other than itself. In other words, although one, it has the capacity of appearing as multiple. The second stanza defines the relation between the unitary Brahman and the aforementioned powers, in particular discussing whether these powers have or not any existence independent of the Brahman's. The third stanza introduces the concept of time, the most important of Brahman's powers: in it time is defined as the regulator of existence, the force that permits and impedes every transformation. Finally, the fourth stanza again discusses the role of Brahman as the cause of transformations, while more specifically

⁶ The fact is fully acknowledged by the editor himself. See IYER 1966: vii.

⁷ The term *vedāntin* is used here without specific connotations. It indicates someone who relies on the authority of the Veda, in particular on the teachings contained in its final parts, the Upaniṣads. Nonetheless Bhartṛhari has often been read as a “real” *vedāntin*. See fn. 26.

⁸ The word *Brahman* and its possible meanings have been extensively investigated. The term *brāhman* has been interpreted as a “sacred formula” or “magic power” (Oldenberg), “enigma” (Renou), “magical word” (Gonda), or “formulation” (Thieme). All these meanings concern the sphere of Vedic sacrifice. For a detailed and updated discussion, see BRERETON 2004.

⁹ See p. 1, l. 1: *anādinidhanam*.

¹⁰ See p. 1, l. 2: *prakriyā jagato yataḥ*.

¹¹ See p. 1, l. 1: *śabdatattvam*.

taking into account the origination of the concrete entities of the world.

2.1 Vṛṣabhadeva's standpoint

Vṛṣabhadeva shows particular concern for the philosophical ideas at the beginning of VP. In particular, the first four stanzas are deemed a single piece, semantically and syntactically homogenous:

*ko punar asau mokṣaḥ. brahmaprāptiḥ. atas tv asyāḥ svarūpakathanāya
prathamataḥ prāpyasya brahmanaḥ svarūpaṁ kathayitum ādyāś catasraḥ
kārikāḥ sarvato bhedābhāvapradaśanāya* (p. 2, ll. 17-18).

Again, what is this liberation? It is the obtainment of Brahman. Hence the first four stanzas are intended to express the nature of this [obtainment], to express the nature of Brahman to be primarily obtained, and to show the absence of differentiation from every point of view.

Although it is not unusual for commentators to be overly diffuse in discussing the initial sections of a work, the effort Vṛṣabhadeva devotes to these stanzas is substantial. In the present edition of the *Sphuṭākṣarā*, which consists of roughly 235 pages, more than 22 pages are devoted to an analysis of the metaphysical problem, almost 10 % of the whole commentary, which is remarkable considering that the four stanzas together represent just 5% of the whole first *kāṇḍa*.

Most of Vṛṣabhadeva's efforts in treating Bhartṛhari's metaphysics are directed at addressing a single question which, for the sake of convenience, I shall henceforth call the “monistic conundrum”. The conundrum is easily stated: how can one argue for the presence of a unitary principle that is the cause and origin of every existing entity despite everyone's cognizance of multiplicity in his/her own experience of reality? In other words, even if one is disposed to accept the presence of such a unitary principle how can the multiple entities encountered in any normal experience of the world be accounted for? I shall try below to outline Vṛṣabhadeva's steps towards a possible solution.

2.2 Brahman and ordinary reality

The first point to be discussed is found right at the beginning of Vṛṣabhadeva's treatment of the *Vṛtti*, in which Bhartṛhari affirms that Brahman transcends the reality of every existing entity.¹² Vṛṣabhadeva's reflection starts with a gloss on an expression present in the *mūla*: *sarvaparikalpātītataṭtvam* ("whose nature is beyond every conceptualization"). Bhartṛhari appears to use it to express the idea that Brahman is beyond every kind of human effort directed at understanding it by rational argument, but Vṛṣabhadeva's interpretation seems to go a little further. He, by emphasizing the semantic connotation of "illusoriness" the root *klp-* has in Sanskrit, defines *parikalpana* as:

asatpadārthābhāvabhāsapratyayaḥ (p.3, l. 10)

The notion in which a non-existing object appears.

This gloss poses for the first time in the *Sphuṭākṣarā* the problem of the existence of objects other than Brahman. Yet Vṛṣabhadeva does not seem willing to discuss such an existence from an absolute point of view; rather he would prefer to categorize all these "conceptualizations" – or "illusory objects" – in terms of proximity to Brahman. The following passage indicates that phenomena may have a different degree of reality:

*dharmadharmyādirūpeṇa yo ayam abhūd bhavati bhaviṣyātītyādīpratyayo
yaś ca gavādīpratyayo bhedābhedabhāvādīpratyayaś ca. etān parikalpān
atīkrāntaṃ rūpam asya* (p. 3, ll. 11-12).

The notion of "this was", "is", "will be", etc., the notion of cow and so forth, as well as the notion of difference, identity, existence and so forth – [assuming] the form of a relation between a quality and a substratum, etc. –

¹² See *Vṛtti*: *sarvaparikalpātītataṭtvam* [...] *brahmetipratijñāyate* (p. 1-3, l. 1.).

they are all transcended by the nature of this [Brahman].

It is evident that Vṛṣabhadeva did not choose his items casually. All the things he mentions denote different ontological levels, connected together like the links of a chain. The first stage is characterized by the presence of concrete external objects. The “cow” is the stock example employed to represent this stage, used since the very beginning of the *śāstric* literature¹³ and stands for tangible entity. The second level is the dimension in which the concept of identity, difference and existence comes into effect. The third and highest level is embodied by the activity of time. Time gives substantiality to the cow, permitting its existence as a worldly object within the interval of two limits (the limits of birth and death in this case). In the same manner ideas such as identity, difference and existence, etc. are meaningful only when time is operating.

So we have a sequence of items consisting of:

1. external objects
2. identity, difference, existence
3. time.

All these items share a common feature: they work only if one conceives of a world in which the main relationship among entities is the same that exists between a quality and its substratum and so on (*dharmadharmyādirūpeṇa*).

2.3. A first attempt at solving the conundrum: superimposition

Once stated that Brahman goes beyond the aforementioned classes of items – the keystone of every standard experience of the world – Vṛṣabhadeva for the first time discusses the problem I call the “monistic conundrum”. The conundrum takes the shape of a dilemma with two different horns. The first horn postulates the difference between the worldly objects and the metaphysical principle evaluating the consequences of such an assumption; the second does exactly the opposite. The first horn is expressed in this way:

¹³ For instance, at the beginning of the *Mahābhāṣya*. See *Mahābhāṣya* p.1.

*yadi tarhi te pratyayās te ca ghaṭādayo na brahmarūpās tataḥ teṣāṃ sattvād
brahmavyatiriktavastvaṅgīkaraṇāt siddhāntavyālopaḥ* (p. 3, ll. 18-19).

If these notions and [these objects] such as pots and so forth do not have the nature of Brahman, then – since they exist (*teṣāṃ sattvād*) – the [non-dualistic] thesis fails, for one must admit a reality exceeding Brahman.

The second horn is not explicitly affirmed but is safe to infer: if these notions do have the same nature as Brahman, how can worldly objects be accounted for, how can the process of change be explained? There would be a monolithic being – Brahman –always incapable of producing anything else, because any such production would be a radical negation of its nature. Hence, preserving a reality that is monistic in its deepest essence raises a double-sided problem. The objects of reality cannot be different from the postulated monistic principle, otherwise monism fails. At the same time, they cannot be identical, otherwise the rise of multiplicity is impossible to explain.

Vṛṣabhadeva attempts to provide a first possible solution to the dilemma by expanding on a single expression found in the opening sentence of the *Vṛtti: samāviṣṭam*. The word can be rendered by expressions such as "totally possessed" or "penetrated from all sides". It refers to Brahman and appears when Bhartṛhari affirms that the metaphysical principle is "totally pervaded" by powers. These powers, as stated above, represent Brahman's ability to appear different from itself. Once again the gloss given by Vṛṣabhadeva to elucidate *samāviṣṭam* is striking: *adhyāsitam*. In this context, the term is baffling. Its literal meaning, "superimposed", is not only semantically distant from *samāviṣṭam* but, when used in an ontological framework, it recalls the technical connotation of the word typical of certain trends of the Advaita Vedānta. The concept of "superimposition" of powers on Brahman is evidently used as an initial attempt to solve the monistic conundrum: by assuming the existence of a Brahman endowed with powers, non-dualism is preserved, since all entities of ordinary reality would be seen as the result of activating such powers:

*īdṛśaṃ hi tad brahmādhyāsitam. yenātadrūpaṃ api tathā pratyavabhāṣate iti
na siddhāntavyālopatā* (p. 3, ll. 20-21).

For a Brahman with such qualities is 'superimposed' with powers so that it appears thus, although not being really so. Therefore there is no failure of the

[non-dualistic] thesis.

Powers are thus introduced to give Brahman the possibility of being identical and permanent but, at the same time, to guarantee its capability of producing multiplicity. Yet their introduction is far from being a satisfactory solution for the problem in question.

2.4 The status of powers: anīrvacanīya

The only tangible result of the introduction of powers is a *regressus ad infinitum*. If previously the question was whether the "concrete objects of the world" are identical with Brahman or not, the problem does not now change, with "powers" just replacing the "concrete objects of the world" in the argument. There is absolutely no gain and Vṛṣabhadeva acknowledges it:

tarhi śaktayo yadi brahmaṇo vyatiriktāḥ sa eva siddhāntavyālopaḥ, “ekaiva yadāmnātaṃ” iti sarvādvaitasya āśritatvāt. athāvyatiriktās tata ekasmād brahmaṇo ‘vyatirekān nānekatā tataś ca nānāparikalpotpattyabhāvaḥ (p. 3, ll. 21-23).¹⁴

Now if the powers were different from Brahman there would be a failure of the [non-dualistic] thesis, since the whole non-dualistic view is based on the assumption that "[Brahman] has been handed down as one" (see VP 1.2). If they were not different from Brahman there would be no multiplicity, because of their lack of differentiation from the unitary Brahman; the various conceptualizations would consequently not arise.

The problem is far from being sorted out by simply postulating the presence of powers. Something more is needed and Vṛṣabhadeva tries to find it using a concept that gives the discussion a new turn. The argument consists of retaining powers but, at the same time, of

¹⁴ The expression *sarvādvaita* is problematic. It can be intended either as the whole *advaita* position or as referring to all the (various) *advaita* positions. Still, exactly what Vṛṣabhadeva is indicating remains rather obscure.

affirming their inexpressibility in terms of identity with or difference from Brahman: to put it briefly, the powers are “superimposed” on Brahman but the relations between them and the metaphysical principle is conceived as impossible to express in words (*anirvacanīya*):

*śaktyupagrāhyasya iti sarvabījatām ācaṣṭe. śaktayaḥ upagrāhyāḥ svīkartavyā
asya tadādhāratvāt. tāsāṃ ca svarūpatām āha tattvānyatvābhyām
anirvacanīyāḥ. na tattvaṃ, brahmaṇaḥ anekatvaprasaṅgāt.
prthagānupalāmbhān nānyatvam”* (p. 21, ll. 11-14).

He says that this [Brahman], which catches the powers (*śaktyupagrāhyasya*), is the seed of all.¹⁵ The powers are caught, appropriated, because [Brahman] is their substratum. He says that their nature is inexpressible (*anirvacanīyāḥ*) in terms of identity or difference (*tattvānyatvābhyām*). There is no identity because Brahman would become multiple (*anekatva*). There is no difference either, because [the powers] are not perceived separately [from Brahman].

Now recourse to *anirvacanīya* seems to put an end to the question, by implying the inadequacy of human reason to understand the essence of reality. But before reaching this conclusion, something else must be considered: the way in which reality is cognized by the knower.

2.5 Degrees of awareness: *vidyā* and *avidyā*

It is sufficiently clear from the arguments discussed so far that Vṛṣabhadeva has in mind an ontological picture in which different degrees of reality occur; the concrete plane of the experiential world (named *vyavahāra*) is opposed to a completely distinct realm which rejects the ordinary modes of existence (very often named *paramārtha*). The dichotomy between Brahman and world corresponds to two different perspectives of awareness: the perspective of those who know and the perspective of those who do not. Vṛṣabhadeva uses the terms normally

¹⁵ I translate *śaktyupagrāhyasya* according to Vṛṣabhadeva’s gloss.

employed to indicate this ambivalence – *vidyā* and *avidyā* – with a certain consistency; an example of this is the way two crucial expressions in the *Vṛtti – sarvaparikalpātītattvam* and *samāviṣṭam sarvābhīḥ śaktibhiḥ* – are commented. They denote two aspects of Brahman that can easily be read as contradictory. The former affirms that Brahman's nature is “beyond every kind of conceptualization”. The latter defines Brahman as “pervaded by all powers”. Vṛṣabhadeva admits the contradiction and affirms that there is only one way of overcoming it: the two expressions must embody two different approaches to Brahman:

tad rūpaṃ tasyeti vidyāvidyāśaktidvayasamanvayāt tathocyate. etad uktaṃ bhavati. vidyārūpaṃ aṅgīkṛtyoktam sarvavikalpātītattvam iti. avidyānibandhanarūpaṃ aṅgīkṛtyoktam samāviṣṭam sarvābhīḥ śaktibhiḥ iti. tena vidyāvidyāvaśāt tathā pratibhāsate iti (p. 4, ll. 7-10).

That is Brahman's nature: it is that way (*tathā*) because of its connection with the two powers of knowledge and nescience. This is what has been said: the expression “its nature transcends every conceptualization” (*sarvavikalpātītattvam*) is affirmed by endorsing [the perspective] of that form of Brahman that is knowledge. The expression “pervaded by all the powers” (*samāviṣṭam sarvābhīḥ śaktibhiḥ*) is affirmed from [the point of view] of that nature [of Brahman] that is the cause of nescience. Therefore Brahman manifests in this way, by virtue of knowledge and nescience.

The previous affirmation implies that normal perception of reality is dichotomous. The approach from the point of view of knowledge is different from the approach from the point of view of nescience. Hence the degree of reality of things depends on the approach followed by a given knower. From a knowledge standpoint, reality is unitary, is Brahman: it is beyond every conceptualization. But from the point of view of nescience, the normal objects of the world do exist and Brahman can be said to be “pervaded” by all powers.¹⁶

2.6 From unity to multiplicity: time

¹⁶ The only way of overcoming this dichotomy is through a change of perspective: it is only by abandoning *avidyā* that the essential character of reality, monism, is revealed. Such a problem evidently becomes a soteriological question. See FERRANTE forthcoming 2013.

Having established that Brahman is capable of becoming other than itself by virtue of its powers, and that such differentiation entails a double-sided reality, some attention is devoted in VP to discussing how the phenomena of the world arise, focusing on the functioning of Brahman's most important power: time.¹⁷ Time is described as the "concomitant cause"¹⁸ of all effects, because it always coexists with the other possible grounds of any given phenomenon. The activity of time consists of preventing or allowing the existence of worldly entities. To illustrate the point Vṛṣabhadeva uses the example of the bud and the blossom:

yataḥ kācic chaktiḥ pratibadhnāt. ¹⁹ *yathaikasmin vṛkṣe prathamataḥ
kisalayābhyanujñā pallavasya pratibandhaḥ, tataḥ kisalasya pratibandhaḥ
pallavasyābhyanujñā* (p. 19, ll. 6-7).

For a certain power stops. It is like a tree: at first, [time] allows the bud and simultaneously stops the blossom. Later it stops the bud and [simultaneously] allows the blossom.

Time introduces into the world the idea of sequence, a core feature of ordinary perception of reality. The activity of time is the theoretical tool devised to explain how the various items of reality exist in the world. Once sequence has come into play, all the peculiar features of reality appear: the distinction between subject and object, the transience of things, and among them, the relation that binds together cause and effect.

Now, the metaphysical theory expounded in VP, and in Vṛṣabhadeva's reading, consists of a strict kind of non-dualism in which the supreme metaphysical principle bears the name of

¹⁷ VP 1.3 is committed to that:

*adhyāhitakālāṃ yasya kālaśaktim upāśritāḥ|
janmādayovikārāḥ śadbhāvabhedasya yonayah||*

The transformations of birth and so forth, that are the six sources of the differentiation of being, depend upon that power of time to which the parts are attributed.

¹⁸See p. 19, l. 2: *sahakārikāraṇam kālaḥ*.

¹⁹ The sentence seems to be incomplete: something like *kācic chaktiḥ abhyanujñāti* needs to be added.

Brahman. Brahman is understood as having powers which make it capable of becoming (apparently) other than itself. According to the interpretation of the *Sphuṭākṣarā*, powers are superimposed (*adhyāsita*) upon Brahman. They are at the same time identical with it, albeit different. Their relation to Brahman is ontologically indefinable (*anirvacanīya*). If we consider them either as completely identical or completely different, we risk falling into contradiction. Among the powers of Brahman, time holds a special place; it is capable of introducing sequence into ordinary experience. Time, defined as the "concomitant cause" of every entity, is the proximate cause of the basic qualities of ordinary reality: distinction between classes of items, between a subject and an object, between cause and effect. Finally, reality can be seen from two quite different viewpoints: a higher one in which non-dualism is preserved in its absolute integrity; and a lower one in which differentiation persists.

Yet the picture outlined so far leaves some problems open: in particular it leaves unsolved the question we have discussed at length, the so-called monistic conundrum. Vṛṣabhadeva has attempted to solve it in two different steps: first, introducing the superimposition of powers to account for how ordinary reality is produced by Brahman; he then uses the concept of *anirvacanīya* to avoid the contradictions posed by the previous hypothesis. The difficulty with such an interpretation is that it leaves no room for further rational speculation. Once the inexpressibility of powers has been established in terms of identity with or difference from Brahman, no more logical argumentation is feasible. The definitive means of reaching the truth cannot therefore be found in human reasoning (*tarka*), but in the authority of the scriptures alone (*śabda*). Such an outcome would be totally acceptable for Bhartṛhari and all the commentators but, before resorting to *śabda*, one last thing remains to be considered: the way in which language fits into the picture.

2.7 Language as a theoretical tool

Bhartṛhari's specificity in the philosophical panorama of classical India is well known: he puts language at the very centre of the ontological picture. There is no difference whatsoever between the way the world is understood – and epistemologically perceived through language – and the way the world is ontologically structured. This fact is stated patently at the very

beginning of VP, and discussed several times in the *Vṛtti*.²⁰

On this point Vṛṣabhadeva's first preoccupation is to evaluate whether the involvement of language is consistent with what was previously established about Brahman. The core of his discussion revolves around a possible objection:

nanu sarvaparikalpātītātattvaṃ tat katham śabdatattvam (p. 6, ll. 19-20).

One may object: it has been said that Brahman is beyond every conceptualization, then how can it be defined as having the nature of word?

A possible answer is found in the previous passage of the *Vṛtti* which affirms that every transformation needs a cause and all worldly entities share the same linguistic nature. Once that is established however, there is a further contradiction to solve, which Vṛṣabhadeva expresses as follows:

*yadi tarhi brahmaikaṃ śabdātmakaṃ tadvyatiriktaṃ cāparaṃ na kiṃcid asti
tataś ca abhidheyābhavāl lokasaṃvyavahārocchedaḥ. atha vyatirekiṇyo
'bhidheyamātrāḥ ekatvavādāvasāda iti codye samādhānārtham āha vivartate
arthabhāvena"* (p. 8, ll. 12-14).

Now if there is a unitary Brahman whose nature is word, and nothing else is distinct from it, then the ordinary world (*lokasaṃvyavahāra*) will cease to be, because there would be nothing to be designated through language. To the objection "if all elements designated through language were different [from Brahman] the monistic thesis would fail", he says, in order to settle the various

²⁰ For instance:

*tat tu bhinnarūpābhimatānām api vikārāṇāṃ prakṛtyanvayitvāc cchabdopagrāhyatayā
śabdopagrāhitayā ca śabdatattvam ity abhidhīyate. sthitipravṛttinivṛttivibhāgā hi
śabdenākriyante* (p. 6, l. 1; p. 7, ll. 1-2).

Actually, this Brahman is said to have the nature of the Word since transformations – even when they are conceived as having a differentiated nature – are connected to an original cause, because language is fully apprehended through that [Brahman] and language fully apprehends [Brahman]. Distinctions like duration, beginning and end are established by language.

viewpoints (*samādhānārtham*), that [Brahman] “is manifest as meaning” (*vivartate arthabhāvena*).

Thus Vṛṣabhadeva finds the answer to this objection in another passage of the *mūla*, namely in the expression *vivartate arthabhāvena* (VP 1.1), which asserts that Brahman is capable of becoming an object of the world just like language and, though unitary in essence, has the capacity of appearing as the differentiated meanings experienced in the world.

2.8 Language and consciousness

The identity between language and Brahman, although utterly fundamental, is insufficient to provide a rational explanation of the monistic problem. What is needed is a further parallel that also equates language with consciousness. Vṛṣabhadeva in particular seems to employ a three-step syllogism to establish a relationship between language, metaphysical principle and consciousness. The syllogism can be summarized in the three following propositions:

- 1) Brahman is language.
- 2) language has intellect as its basis, so it is essentially identical with it.²¹
- 3) therefore Brahman and intellect are the same.²²

²¹ See p. 8, l. 10-11: *paramārthato vyaktāpi vāg buddhyadhiṣṭhānaiveti. ata eva caikatvam tasyā iti.*

From an absolute point of view the word, even when manifested, has the intellect as its seat (*adhiṣṭhānaiva*). Therefore there is unity between word and intellect.

²² *tasya iti brahmaṇaḥ. tad eva hi śabdārūpaṃ brahma pariśuddhāvasthāyāṃ prakāśarūpatāyā caitanyam[...] tasya cāyaṃ vivartaś caitanyaṃ yat trayyantavidaḥ paramātmetyāhuḥ* (p. 11, l. 29; p.12, l. 1).

The word *tasya* refers to Brahman. Brahman, whose nature is word, is, in its pure condition, consciousness, because it has the nature of light. This manifestation of Brahman is consciousness. It is what the knowers of *trayyanta* call the Supreme Self.

Furthermore:

antaḥ iti. na buddher viśayabhāvagamanena sanniveśaḥ kintu buddhitattvāvyatirekāt

Once this triple identity has been accepted, the basic question returns as to whether there is any rational tool to fathom the monistic conundrum.

2.9 Language as a pragmatic fact

After such a long discussion, we eventually come to a theoretical picture consisting of a trio of main items (Brahman, language and consciousness) in which each element of the trio can be thought of either in terms of unity (Brahman, language in its highest form, Self), or in terms of multiplicity (powers of Brahman, meanings, various selves). Yet this trio is insufficient to explain the conundrum, at least unless language is considered as a purely theoretical argument. To find a possible rational solution we have to consider another aspect: the way language operates.

The pragmatic dimension of language, although sometimes overlooked, is investigated at length in VP.²³ Vṛṣabhadeva seems to imply that such a dimension has a broad influence:

*pratipuruṣaṃ sarve varṇāḥ buddhau kramasaṃhāreṇa bhedatirodhānena
vāvatiṣṭhante, na tu tena rūpeṇa paraśaṃbodho bhavatīti buddhis tāvat prāṇe
'rpayati, te prāṇavṛtṭyanugrhitāḥ sthānakaraṇebhyo vyaktāḥ paraśaṃbodhāya
syandante, sravanīti. (p. 7, ll. 23-25).*

For each and every man, all meaningful sounds reside in the intellect with their sequence contracted or with their differentiation concealed. But in that form there is no way to make others comprehend. At first the intellect delivers the [meaningful sounds] to breath; then the sounds, supported by the activity of breath, and manifested through the places and organs of articulation, circulate to

Then there is the word "inside" (*antaḥ*): the expression "entering inside" (*saṃniveśa*) is not to be taken in the sense of becoming an object (*viśayabhāvagāmanena*) of the intellect, but in the sense that there is no distinction [between it] and the true nature of the intellect.

²³See for example: VP 1.48, 1.53, 1.54.

make others comprehend; that is equal to saying "they flow".

The quoted passage is a mine of information: first of all it states that "all sounds reside in the intellect" and are manifested in order to become intelligible to others. The idea is that language exists in a unitary state, completely devoid of sequence, but that it somehow expands in order to become comprehensible to others. In the first phase, language is undistinguished and there is no differentiation at all between a word and its meaning. It is only when a certain speaker initiates the process of differentiation – taking place as described in the passage – that language becomes usable in the mundane world and can be comprehended by a listener. That is not enough however. Once the listener catches the audible form of the words pronounced by the speaker, he is able to understand its meaning and reintroduce language into the intellectual sphere. When that happens, language once more becomes unitary and devoid of differentiation, as it was at the beginning of the process. This unitary state is defined as follows:

*artho hi tasyām avasthāyām buddher avyatikavartī śabdaś ca.
śabdārthaśaktayaḥ sarvā eva tatra yaugapadyena āsate. ata evārthād
abhedāt śabdābhedāc* (em.; Ed: *svagatābhedāc*) *ca ekā* (p. 8, ll. 5-7).

For in this condition meaning is not distinct from the intellect and the same goes for the word. All potentialities (*śaktayaḥ*) of word and meaning reside simultaneously in the intellect. Thus, since the word is not distinct from the intellect and from itself, it is "one" (*ekā*).

Such an evolution of language from unity to multiplicity described here is well known. What seems clear from Vṛṣabhadeva's analysis is that this model has a bearing on the metaphysical side as well. Right at the beginning of the quoted passage he establishes a parallel between individual conscience (*pratipuruṣam*) and the absolute principle (*Brahman*), with language as the connecting factor. Once accepted that the path of expansion and contraction of Brahman is the same as language, it is finally clear that the monistic dilemma can be solved by analogy. The relationship between Brahman and worldly phenomena is the same as between language in its unitary state and the audible "bits" of language used in everyday communication. Such a process of differentiation does not entail a decay of the unitary state, since either Brahman or language is in its purest state. On this point Vṛṣabhadeva is very clear:

prāyeṇa ca padārthāḥ paṭādayo 'nyasya kusumāde rūpam upagṛhṇānta svarūpaparityāgena dṛṣṭā, sphaṭikādayaś coparāgarūpam. iha tathā na ity āha tattvād apracyutasya iti. anyarūpopagrahe 'pi tatsvarūpāpracyutir iti. katham bhinnānekajātīyapadārtharūpaṃ pratipadyata ity āha bhedānukāreṇa iti. yadi paramārthato 'nekākāratābhyupagamaḥ kuto virodhaḥ (em.; Ed: avirodha). yatas tu bhedapratyavabhāsayogyatāprabhāvād bhinnam iva pratyavabhāstate tad abhinnam api, tad bhedaṃ anukarotīti (em.; Ed: anukarotiveti) (p. 8, l. 24-28; p. 9, l. 1).

Generally speaking, objects like cloth and so forth, when they acquire the form of another thing, like a flower, etc. are seen in common experience to lose their proper nature, just as a crystal acquires the appearance of the colours in it. This is not the case here, since the author says "it does not decay from its essence" (*tattvād apracyutasya*): even in assuming another form there is no decay from its proper nature. How does it attain a various and differentiated nature? The author's answer is "by imitating difference" (*bhedānukāreṇa*). If from an absolute point of view it is accepted that Brahman's nature is capable of having various forms, where is the contradiction? That Brahman, although undivided, appears to be divided by virtue of its capacity (*yogyatā*) to manifest itself as if differentiated. Brahman imitates difference.²⁴

The cogency of the whole argumentation is evident on bearing in mind the following points:

1. it is a matter of fact that all cognition is intertwined with language. Hence language must be the common ground of all phenomena (see VP 1.131 for instance).
2. language in its highest form is one. The affirmation is not merely theoretical, but rather derives from observing the concrete functioning of language: the communication of meanings is instantaneous. Any division in language is ultimately unreal.

²⁴ It is important to note that Vṛṣabhadeva comments *bhedānukāreṇa*, stressing the fact that the term *anukāra* must be understood in its active meaning of 'imitation'. ("Brahman imitates difference").

3. if language is one and is also the ultimate ground of all reality, it necessarily follows that reality in its deepest essence is also one. The name given to reality in its unitary state is Brahman.

4. the relation between Brahman and particular phenomena is exactly the same as between language in its unitary form and its various subdivisions.

Conclusions

In the preceding sections I have tried to show that Vṛṣabhadeva's attitude in commenting the text, although claimed to be humble, is all but neutral.

First, Vṛṣabhadeva chooses a single aspect of Bhartṛhari's metaphysics, places it at stage centre and interprets all the rest in relation to this basic aspect. Furthermore, once the ganglia of the metaphysics in VP are seen to be connected to the basic problem, Vṛṣabhadeva outlines a possible solution. The problem of the relationship between unity and multiplicity is tackled first by employing the idea of superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of powers on Brahman; he then postulates the idea that such powers are inexpressible in terms of identity with or difference from Brahman. Finally the conundrum is solved by analogy between Brahman and language in its pragmatic aspect.

Now, whereas Vṛṣabhadeva's final step is in complete accord with Bhartṛhari's viewpoint,²⁵ the ideas of "superimposition" and "inexpressibility of powers" are rather problematic and not openly advocated in the *mūla*. The former is never used by Bhartṛhari to describe relations between powers and Brahman, especially in Vṛṣabhadeva's straightforward manner. The latter is merely suggested in a quotation of the *Vṛtti* (p.9, l. 1-2) and does not seem to play a key-role in Bhartṛhari's viewpoint. As suggested above, these ideas give rise to the question of a possible connection between Vṛṣabhadeva and classical Advaita Vedānta. Evidently, proving any direct relation between the two *milieux* on such a basis is complex. Nonetheless some considerations are possible. It is a fact that Bhartṛhari and Advaita-vedāntins share some common beliefs (they are non-dualistic; they assign to the Veda a strong

²⁵The conflation of linguistics and metaphysics is probably the single most important idea of Bhartṛhari's conceptual universe. It is also one of the first rational justifications of non-dualism in the history of Indian speculation. The idea that the solution of the monistic problem must be sought in human "languageing" (Matilal 1990:85) capability (that is in no way different from the capability of "being agents") has a strong impact on the monistic speculation that followed. A clear example of this influence is discussed in Torella 2008.

metaphysical role; they contend the epistemological supremacy of *śabda* over the other *pramāṇas*, and so on); yet disagreements are also substantial (for example, the metaphysical principle is conceived differently, thus leading to an altogether divergent ontology). Perhaps by stressing the similarities and playing down the differences, Bhartṛhari has frequently been read as a *vedāntin* thinker,²⁶ not only in the weak sense I specified above, but as a forerunner of classical Advaita philosophers like Śaṅkara, Maṇḍana Mīśra and so forth.

Vṛṣabhadeva's position is intriguing. His treatment of VP's material never questions Bhartṛhari's theoretical specificity, yet in his analysis he employs two interpretative tools proper to Advaita hermeneutics: *adhyāsa* and *anirvacanīya*. These ideas are not attested in Gauḍapāda's *Māṇḍūkya-kārikās* (7th c. CE) and begin to be discussed in Śaṅkara and Maṇḍana, hence from the early 8th c. onwards. For *adhyāsa* the *locus classicus* is the beginning of Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*,²⁷ while *anirvacanīya* is explicitly discussed for the first time in Maṇḍana's *Brahmasiddhi*.²⁸ Now the mere use of *adhyāsa* and *anirvacanīya* is certainly insufficient to postulate any direct influence of classical *advaitins* on Vṛṣabhadeva. It is probable however that all non-dualist thinkers shared a common background of concepts to be employed when necessary or that the two concepts, although present in so-called pre-classical Advaita Vedānta, are not attested in the extant works.

Obviously, the question cannot be exhausted at this point. I plan to devote a future contribution analysing in depth any possible relation between Vṛṣabhadeva and the Advaita milieu and, possibly, whether Vṛṣabhadeva's reading has somehow influenced Bhartṛhari's acceptance in the ensuing history of Indian thought.

On the whole, I hope to have shown that Vṛṣabhadeva's treatment of Bhartṛhari's metaphysics is well worth a discussion. Although simple and unassuming, the *Sphuṭākṣarā* is

²⁶ Bhartṛhari is considered a *vedāntin* by modern scholars such as Nakamura and Matilal. See Nakamura 2004: 457 and Matilal 1986: 14.

²⁷ See *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*:1. *yuṣmadasmadpratyayagocarayor viśayaviśayaṇos tamaḥ prakāśavad viruddhasvabhāvayor itaretarabhāvānupapattau. siddhāyām taddharmanām api sutarām itaretarabhāvānupapattiḥ ity ato 'smatpratyayagocare viśayini cidātmake yuṣmatpratyayagocarasya viśayasya taddharmāṇām cādhyāśaḥ, tadviparyayeṇa viśayaṇas taddharmāṇām ca viśaye adhyāso mithyeti bhavitum yuktam.*

The passage is thus translated in Thibaut 1890, I: 3. "It is a matter not requiring any proof that the object and the subject whose respective spheres are the notion of the 'Thou' (the Non-Ego) and the 'Ego', and which are opposed to each other as much as darkness and light are, cannot be identified. All the less can their respective attributes be identified. Hence it follows that it is wrong to superimpose upon the subject - whose Self is intelligence, and which has for its sphere the notion of the Ego - the object whose sphere is the notion of the Non-Ego, and the attributes of the object, and vice versa to superimpose the subject and the attributes of the subject on the object".

²⁸ See *Brahmasiddhi*: 9. *nāvidyā brahmaṇaḥ svabhāvaḥ, nārthāntaram nātyantam asaī, nāpi saī, evam eveyam avidyā māyā mithyāsvabhāsa ity ucyate. svabhāvaś cet kasyacit, anyo'anyo vā paramārtha eveti nāvidyā, atyantāsatve khaṇuṣpasadṛśī na vyavahārāṅgaṁ tasmād anirvacanīyā.*

The passage is thus translated in Trasher 1993:1. "Avidyā is not the essence of Brahman, nor another thing; not absolutely non-existent, nor existent. It is just for this reason that is called 'nescience', 'illusion', 'false appearance'. If it were the essence of anything, whether different or not different (from it), it would be ultimately real, and therefore not *avidyā*. If it were absolutely non-existent, it would not enter into practical activity any more than a sky-flower. Therefore it is inexpressible".

structured in an acute manner and shows a remarkable commitment to discovering an underlying factor in Bhartṛhari's edifice. Such facts that are more than enough – I believe – to give Śrīvṛṣabha the credit he deserves.

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