

Vṛṣabhadeva on the status of ordinary phenomena: between Bhartṛhari and Advaita Vedānta

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Abstract: Vṛṣabhadeva's *Sphuṭākṣarā*, a commentary on the first chapter of Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* and its *Vṛtti*, offers a peculiar interpretation of the monistic ideas exposed at the beginning of the *mūla* text. The reflection on the status of ordinary reality and its relation with the unitary metaphysical principle is particularly interesting. Although according to Bhartṛhari's perspective the entities of the world are real, the *Sphuṭākṣarā* offers a more intricate picture in which different degrees of reality seem involved. Furthermore, the author adopts hermeneutical tools that are unusual in Bhartṛhari's texts, and comparable to those of Advaita Vedānta. In particular, the article will deal with Vṛṣabhadeva's use of the notion of 'inexpressibility' (*anirvacanīyatva*), as well as with other concepts which are typical of the scholastic phase of Advaita. In discussing these affinities the paper will also touch upon the problem of Vṛṣabhadeva's historical collocation.

Keywords: Bhartṛhari – Advaita Vedānta – Maṇḍana Mīśra – Vṛṣabhadeva – Vākyapadīya – Sphuṭākṣarā

Introduction

The present paper is a second step in the exploration of the thought of Vṛṣabhadeva (possibly 8th c. CE), the author of the *Sphuṭākṣarā*,¹ which is an extensive commentary on the first chapter of Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* (henceforth VP, 5th c. CE)² and its *Vṛtti*.³ The first article (Ferrante 2013) was intended to shed light on the ideas of this neglected thinker, by focusing on Vṛṣabhadeva's analysis of the metaphysical material contained in the first four *kārikās* of the VP. The present one

¹ The text is usually known as *Paddhati*. For more information on the work and its author see Iyer 1966, Iyer 1969, Coward/Raja 1990, Ferrante 2013.

² I will use Rau's edition (1977) to refer to the VP's *kārikās*; whenever I quote either from the *Sphuṭākṣarā* or from the *Vṛtti* I refer to Iyer's edition (1966). Bhartṛhari's date has been established by Frauwallner on the basis of the historical collocations of Buddhist authors related to him (in particular Dignāga, see Frauwallner 1961). Still, if one were to accept an earlier chronology for Buddhist thinkers, as proposed by Krasser (see Krasser 2012), Bhartṛhari's date should accordingly be revised.

³ It is still a matter of debate whether the *Vṛtti*, a commentary on the first and the second chapter of VP, should be attributed to Bhartṛhari, as is traditionally maintained, or to a later author, as suggested by some modern scholars. For a comprehensive view of the discussion see Biarreau 1964, Aklujkar 1972 and 1993, Bronkhorst 1988, and Houben 1997a and 1997b. Although I keep an open mind on the issue, in this paper I accept the traditional view according to which the two texts were composed by the same person.

aims at examining a single (but significant) point in which the commentator seems to understand Bhartṛhari's thought differently from what one would expect from reading only the *kārikās* and the *Vṛtti*. The point in question concerns a philosophical issue that tends to be a constant issue for every monistic stance: the status of ordinary phenomena (in short: How can the existence of a single reality be argued for when ordinary experience is based on multiplicity? What is the relationship between a single, postulated reality and the multiple manifestations experienced in ordinary life?).

In the previous publication I showed how Bhartṛhari answers this 'monistic conundrum' by theorizing a unifying element (language) that is active at every level of manifestation and is shared by all entities (from the highest – in the VP system called 'Brahman' – to the lowest). In doing so, the author is able to assume the oneness of the metaphysical principle without denying the reality of common experience. On the contrary, Vṛṣabhadeva's attitude is more controversial. He shares with Bhartṛhari the notion that language is critical in a person's approach to phenomena, but several passages of the *Sphuṭākṣarā* suggest the idea that ordinary experience, if compared to Brahman, enjoys a lower 'status of reality' or, perhaps, that it has no real status at all. Such a picture looks quite similar to the one advocated by Advaita Vedānta and a possible proximity with that milieu is further corroborated by Vṛṣabhadeva's use of concepts that are typical of the scholastic phase of the school. In what follows I will assess the import of Vṛṣabhadeva's ideas by analyzing the relevant passages in his text. But before proceeding into that it is necessary to re-evaluate the question of a possible proximity between Advaitavādins and Bhartṛhari himself.

1. Defining Brahman: Bhartṛhari and Advaita Vedānta

Although one may be induced to think the opposite, there are no passages in the VP's *kārikās* (as well as in the *Vṛtti* of the first chapter) which prove that Bhartṛhari conceived ordinary reality as a demoted instantiation of the single metaphysical principle that lies at the foundation of his thought. Indeed, he constantly tends to stress – both explicitly and implicitly and at every level of analysis (metaphysical, epistemological and axiological) – that reality is pervaded by the same unifying factor, language: language, being absolutely real, no area of human experience can be truly regarded as 'unreal'. Nevertheless, Indian philosophy shows a tendency towards a radical form of idealism which is based on totally different premises; according to this perspective worldly experience is illusory and essentially other than 'true reality'. Such a kind of idealism has been powerfully expressed since the very beginning of Indian thought (the most ancient example of this trend obviously being the metaphysical tenets contained in the older Upaniṣads)⁴ but in the history of Brahmanical thought its methodical theorization (in a strong form of monism) happened quite late. The school which devoted itself the most to the task was the Uttaramīmāṃsā, better known as Vedānta, the systematization of which is extremely difficult to date but which was surely rounded off after all the other classical *darśanas*. The date of the *mūla* text of the school – Bādarāyaṇa's *Vedāntasūtras* – is highly hypothetical, and the work probably passed through a process of formation, enlargement and consolidation that lasted centuries. Apart from the *Vedāntasūtras*, the first text Advaita undoubtedly considers part of its legacy is Gauḍapāda's *Māṇḍūkya-kārikās* (possibly 6th c. CE but the date is uncertain, see Potter 1981:102-105). After that, probably between the 7th and 8th c., the school experienced its golden age, with thinkers like Śaṅkara (700-750 CE, see Harimoto 2006) – by far the most famed of all Advaita philosophers – and Maṇḍana Miśra, whose contributions thrived between the realms of (Pūrva-) Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. At the time of Bhartṛhari the *Vedāntasūtras* probably existed in some form. Comans (Comans 2000:163) proposes the 5th c. CE as a possible time frame for dating the composition, and Nakamura (Nakamura 1983:435-436) roughly agrees with him. In the latter's classical study of early Vedānta, the period between 400 and 500 CE is described as a crucial moment in the history of Indian speculation, marked by a vigorous renaissance of Brahmanical

4 Whether the Upaniṣads should be considered the beginning of Indian philosophy or simply a prestigious but pre-philosophical antecedent is debatable. Nakamura speaks, quite rightly I think, of "a philosophy in the process of formulation" (Nakamura 1983:110).

thought, which was probably also caused by the Hindu-oriented policy adopted by the Guptas.⁵ Yet, in spite of Nakamura's commendable and useful efforts to study the prehistory of Vedānta, it is still difficult to get a clear picture of the beginnings of the school, mainly due to the scarcity of textual material. The problem becomes thornier if one tries to associate ideas that are usually related to Vedānta with authors belonging to different milieus. Bhartṛhari is an appropriate example of this difficulty. Even if Nakamura himself (Nakamura 2004:457-460) and Matilal (Matilal 1986:14) plainly consider him an (Advaita-)Vedānta thinker, the question cannot be exhausted easily and requires some consideration.⁶

If we limit ourselves to metaphysics, Advaita's basic propositions can be reasonably reduced to two central claims put forth for the first time in the older Upaniṣads⁷ and reiterated throughout the history of the school:

- (1) From an ontological standpoint reality is reducible to one, unitary principle named Brahman,
- (2) This principle is identical with the individual consciousness, the Self, or *ātman*.⁸

These critical tenets serve as a convenient starting point for evaluating Bhartṛhari's proximity to Advaita. Bhartṛhari would surely endorse proposition (1). Actually one of the most convincing proofs of his adherence to Advaita appears right at the beginning of the VP and regards the issue of monism. The well-known first *kārikā* states that a single metaphysical entity – Brahman – is the source of every worldly manifestation; the second one, less quoted but equally crucial, affirms Brahman's oneness.⁹ Whether Bhartṛhari accepts proposition (2) is less straightforward but nevertheless evincible. In the VP there are no plain affirmations equating Brahman and *ātman* as it happens in the upaniṣadic literature. Still Bhartṛhari undoubtedly accepts that the two must be identified, and some passages of his texts hint at that. For example, at the end of the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.1, some *kārikās* are quoted from an unknown source (or maybe more than one). A half-verse of one of them clearly regards consciousness as the same as Brahman:

tasyaikam api caitanyaṃ bahudhā pravibhajyate /
(VP p.12, ll. 1-2).

Although one, the consciousness of that [Brahman] is diversely divided.

5 It is perhaps not by chance that the first acknowledged mention of a theorized form of Vedānta belongs to this period. It appears in a Buddhist philosophical work, Bhavya's *Madhyamakahrdayakārikās*, composed during the 6th c. CE. In it the author dedicates an entire chapter, the *Vedāntatattvaviniścaya*, to the enquiry and the refutation of *vedāntavāda*. See Qvarnström 1989.

6 The definition of Vedānta is a problem in itself. The school developed as an exegetical tradition devoted to the final section of the Vedic corpus, the Upaniṣads or Vedānta, as clearly revealed by its name. The term *uttara* does not indicate a chronological posteriority to (Pūrva)-Mīmāṃsā. It rather reflects the different subject matters of the two schools, with Vedāntins largely focusing on the last part (*uttara*) of the Vedic corpus, viz. the Upaniṣads (Torella 2011:109). Vedāntins' efforts are largely directed at making sense of the statements of the Upaniṣads; these statements are diversified, often contradictory and need to be explained consistently.

7 Examples are countless; see for instance, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up. 2.5.19.

8 For an articulated definition of Vedānta see Nakamura 1983: 90-98.

9 *anādinidhanam brahma śabdatattvaṃ yad akṣaram /*
vivartate'rthabhāvena prakriyā jagato yataḥ // VP 1.1.

That Brahman, which is without beginning and end, the essence of which is word, which is the phoneme appearing as meaning and from which the production of the world comes.

ekam eva yad āmnātaṃ bhinnāśaktivyapāśrayāt /
apṛthakte'pi śaktibhyaḥ pṛthaktveneṇa vartate // VP 1.2

That which has been handed down as one, due to its resorting to various powers, seems to have a nature different from powers, although there is no difference with them.

Another *kārikā*, VP 1.134, affirms that the consciousness of all beings is intrinsically linguistic (the key term, *vāgrūpatā*, is mentioned in VP 1.132):

*saiṣā saṃsāriṇāṃ saṃjñā bahir antaś ca vartate /
tanmātrām avyatikrāntaṃ caitanyaṃ sarvajātiṣu //*

That very [linguistic nature], existing externally and internally, is the consciousness of entities undergoing transmigration. In no modality of existence does consciousness transgress its being an element of that [linguistic nature].

Bhartṛhari seems to share with Advaita-Vedānta the notion that a single principle is sufficient to explicate the manifestation of all; but when one evaluates the qualities attributed to this principle, differences start to emerge. Bhartṛhari mentions Brahman relatively rarely in the *kārikās* (the most important mentions being: VP 1.1, 1.2, 1.11, 1.22, 1.144, 2.237). In these passages the author attributes to Brahman qualities that revolve around five main ideas:

- 1) Brahman is of linguistic nature (VP 1.1).
- 2) It is without limit and eternal (VP 1.1).
- 3) It is the origin of all manifestations (VP 1.1)
- 4) It is one although apparently divided (VP 1.2, 1.22)
- 5) It is the final purpose of human endeavors (VP 1.22, 1.144).

Scholastic Advaita accepts these characterizations, too. But, conversely, some of Advaita Vedānta's most peculiar ideas concerning Brahman are patently lacking in VP. I will limit my considerations to just three: the distinction between a higher and a lower form of Brahman; the idea that the lower form of Brahman is to be identified with God; the set of attributes – *sat*, *cit*, *ānanda* – frequently used in scholastic Advaita to characterize Brahman. References to two forms of Brahman go back to the formative period of Advaita; lower Brahman (*aparaṃ brahma*) is cited already in *Māṇḍūkya-kārikās* 1.25:

*praṇavo hy aparaṃ brahma praṇavaś ca paraṃ smṛtaḥ/
apūrvō 'nantaro 'bāhyo 'naparaḥ praṇavo 'vyayaḥ//*

For the *om* syllable is traditionally regarded as the lower Brahman and as the higher one. The *om* syllable is without before, without after, non-external, single, and unchanging.¹⁰

The idea is that there is a higher form of Brahman devoid of any adjuncts (*nirguṇa*) and a lower form to which adjuncts can be attributed (*saguṇa*). The conception soon became pivotal in the standard Advaita viewpoint, especially from Śaṅkara onwards. A couple of passages from *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (henceforth BSB) are sufficient to clarify the idea:

*dvirūpaṃ hi brahmāvagamyate. nāmarūpavikārabhedopādhiviśiṣṭam,
tadviparītaṃ ca sarvopādhivivarjitam [...] evaṃ sahasraśo
vidyāvidyāvīṣayabhedena brahmaṇo dvirūpatāṃ darśayanti vākyaṇi* (BSB 1.1.11).

For Brahman is considered having two forms: one characterized by adjuncts, such

¹⁰ For a different translation see Buoy 2000:108.

as multiple transformations, name and form. The other, opposite to [the former], is free from any adjunct. [...]

So passages, by thousands, show that Brahman has two forms, according to the differentiation between the sphere of knowledge and that of nescience.

It is worth noting that Śaṅkara sets apart the two natures of Brahman also from a soteriological standpoint. In BSB 3.3.29 and 3.3.30, the path of the gods, corresponding to *saguṇa* Brahman, is explicitly distinguished from the path leading to *nirguṇa* Brahman:

*na hy ātmaikatvadarśinām āptakāmānām ihaiva dagdhāśeṣakleśabījānām
ārabdhabhogakarmāśayaakṣapaṇavyatirekeṇāpekṣitavyaṁ kiṃcid asti
tatrānarthikā gatiḥ* (BSB 3.3.30).

For the ones who see the unity of the Self, whose wishes are fulfilled, all seeds of which have been burned by going beyond the destruction of intentions, actions and enjoyments already undertaken, nothing is required. [For them] proceeding into that [path of the gods] is useless.

The distinction between two kinds of Brahman is evidently critical in the history of the school,¹¹ but it is completely missing in Bhartṛhari's perspective. In his view Brahman is simply unitary, without any further specification. The second point in which Bhartṛhari differs substantially from scholastic Advaita is a corollary of the former. In Advaita's metaphysics *saguṇa* Brahman is explicitly identified with God. Such identification, besides being inconsistent with Bhartṛhari's lack of acceptance of two different kinds of Brahman, is also denied by the fact that the author of VP does not seem to have theistic tendencies.¹² Indeed, it is not by chance that Vṛṣabhadeva remarks that VP does not include a salutation to a specific deity at the beginning because "there is a praise of Brahman" (VP p. 2, ll. 6-7). A third point concerns the typical set of attributes employed by Advaitavādins to define Brahman, summarized in the compound *saccidānanda*, made of 'being', 'consciousness' and 'beatitude'. Even within Advaita this characterization is quite troublesome. The formula is not attested at the early stage of the school (in Śaṅkara's works the closest formulation being *satyājñānanta*, mentioned in BSB 1.1.15).¹³ But, of course, each of these features has been extensively discussed as a quality of Brahman since the early period. The identification of Brahman with 'being' (*sat*) is old: various instances occur in the Upaniṣads.¹⁴ The relationship between Brahman and consciousness is stated, for example, in this half-verse (1.17.13) of Śaṅkara's *Upadeśasāhasrī* (henceforth UPS):

asad etat tato yuktaṁ saccinmātraṁ na kalpitam.

Therefore it is reasonable that this [triad: form, name, action] is unreal. [Ātman] is nothing but Being-Consciousness (Mayeda's translation modified; Mayeda 1979: 161).

As for blissfulness, in BSB 1.1.19 Śaṅkara says:

¹¹ For example, it has induced scholars such as Paul Deussen to distinguish between an exoteric and an esoteric form of Vedānta. See Deussen 1912:98.

¹² Obviously this does not mean that Bhartṛhari did not have religious beliefs. Such beliefs were simply not pertinent to the overall tone of VP.

¹³ It is attested for the first time in the *Nṛsiṃhottaratāpanī Upaniṣad*. See Potter 1981:606.

¹⁴ One example is *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.3.1-2.

yasmād asmin ānandamaye prakṛta ātmani pratibuddhasyāsya jīvasya tadyogaṃ śāsti. tadātmanā yogas tadyogas tadbhāvāpattir muktir ity arthaḥ.

For [the Veda] teaches the union of the enlightened individual soul with this Self under discussion, that consists of blissfulness. The union with that Self, the union with it, the obtainment of that condition, that is the meaning of liberation.

In the VP there is no trace of the compound *saccidānanda*. Yet Bhartṛhari would certainly accept each of these attributes as a reliable description of Brahman. I have already quoted passages showing that Brahman can be equated with ‘being’ and ‘consciousness’. The idea of bliss (*ānanda*) is surely less stressed but there is little doubt that for Bhartṛhari the knowledge of Brahman has soteriological implications. The point is, rather, how to interpret this dimension.¹⁵

2. Bhartṛhari and Advaita Vedānta on the status of reality

Bhartṛhari’s solution to the conundrum affecting monism is based on the following argument. Brahman is said to possess powers enabling it to become different from itself without losing oneness. Elsewhere (Ferrante 2013) I showed that this solution is viable, provided that the metaphysical principle is equated with language in its pragmatic dimension. According to Bhartṛhari, the conveyance of meaning between a speaker and a listener is instantaneous. If that is true, language must necessarily exist first in a form that is undivided, unaffected by time and totally coincident with the consciousness of the speaker. Once the process of communication is set off, language becomes audible, affected by time and divided into parts. But that does not entail that the original oneness is lost. Now if this claim is proven on the linguistic level, the passage to the ontological one is almost effortless and is carried out by analogy, as follows:

- (1) Language is one, still it becomes multiple for the sake of communication.
- (2) But language is Brahman.
- (3) Then Brahman, too, must be able to produce worldly entities without losing its oneness.

The crucial part of the argumentation is point (2): Brahman and language must be conceived as identical. It is therefore not accidental that the first words of VP, and much of the efforts of the first *kāṇḍa*, are directed at upholding Brahman’s ‘linguistic nature’. Furthermore, such an explanation clearly indicates the critical role of the linguistic dimension. Linguistics is the blueprint for ontology, not vice versa; a fact that is not at all unexpected if one considers that Bhartṛhari is, first and foremost, a *vaiyākaraṇa*. However, Bhartṛhari’s position is philosophically interesting since it gives way to a peculiar ontology. The world is certainly two-tiered: on the one hand there is Brahman, on the other hand there are standard entities. But there is no radical difference between the two. The same unifying factor, language, guarantees their homogeneity.

Advaitavādins would not share Bhartṛhari’s premises on the centrality of language. And, quite expectedly, the relationship between Brahman and ordinary phenomena is one of the most troublesome and fiercely debated issues in the history of the school. According to Advaita, any rational attempt to define Brahman is doomed to falsehood as it brings about limitations (*upādhi*) that negate Brahman’s real essence. Hence true reality is, strictly speaking, ineffable and unthinkable. Nonetheless Advaita thinkers concede that at least a phenomenological description of the world is possible. In doing so, they divide phenomena into three broad categories, each one embodying a different degree of reality: the real, the manifested and the unreal. These levels are defined by the Sanskrit terms *paramārtha*, *vyavahāra* and *pratibhāsa* and are already present in Śaṅkara. They are

¹⁵ Bhartṛhari believed that Brahman is somehow attainable (there are various occurrences in which the word ‘Brahman’ is connected with verbs conveying the idea of ‘reaching’ or ‘obtaining’; see VP 1.22 or 1.144 for example) and that such an attainment would lead to a status of supreme goodness. Unfortunately the idea is not expanded in the texts and one has to rely on a few laconic passages of the *Vṛtti*. For an overview of the problem see Iyer 1964, Bronkhorst 1995, Ferrante forth.

completely unrelated to each other and cannot coexist within the same epistemological perspective. They are, in a sense, instantiations of the epistemological prowess of a given knower. Any knower is theoretically capable of accepting the validity of a certain piece of knowledge and, concurrently, of casting aside what s/he judges unreliable. This capability of setting aside wrong cognitions is crucial for Advaitavādins. The Sanskrit term used to indicate the action of ‘rejecting’ a wrong piece of knowledge is *bādha*. As pointed out by Deutsch (Deutsch 1969: 15-19), *bādha* is the epistemic experience in which the knower changes his/her own beliefs concerning a certain state of affairs through the force of a new and more cogent piece of knowledge. In short, *bādha* indicates the action of ‘being falsified by superior proof’. According to Advaita philosophers, the possibility for an entity to be falsified is ontologically relevant. In fact, it is even more than that: It is the sole criterion for judging the degree of reality of an entity; the more easily one kind of cognition is falsified by another more cogent piece of knowledge, the lower its degree of reality and vice versa. Therefore the highest level – *nirguṇa* Brahman – is the one falsified by no cognition at all. On the opposite side, the lower level – *pratibhāsa* – being self-contradictory and absolutely subjective – is falsified by all cognitions. Having thus excluded the extremes, what remains (the *vyāvahārika* level) is, inevitably, the domain of rational analysis. Within this domain, philosophical efforts are legitimate but with the warning that they enjoy a somewhat precarious condition: They can be ‘falsified’ at any time (although, admittedly, it does not happen that often) by obtaining the superior level of reality (Brahman). The following passage from BSB 2.1.14 states explicitly:

sarvavyavahārāṇām eva prāg brahmātmātāvijñānāt satyatvopapattēḥ.

For the reality of all ordinary activities is established, before the comprehension of Brahman as the Self.

From the point of view of the ordinary knower this by no means implies that standard reality is unreal. Ordinary activities should go on until the knowledge of Brahman arises:

tasmāt prāg brahmātmātāpratibodhād upapannaḥ sarvo laukiko vaidikaś ca vyavahāraḥ (BSB 2. 1.14).

Hence, before the realization of Brahman as the Self, all activities, both ordinary and Vedic, are established.

Advaita’s position is thus very far from the subjective idealism that is typical, for instance, of Vijñānavāda Buddhism. Another passage, from BSB 2.2.28, says:

nābhāva upalabdheḥ [...] upalabhyate hi pratipratyayaṃ bāhyo’rthaḥ stambaḥ kuḍyaṃ ghaṭaḥ paṭa iti. na copalabhyamānasyaivābhāvo bhavitum arhati.

Non-existence [of external things] is impossible because [external things] are perceived. Indeed, for each cognition, an external object is perceived, such as a post, a wall, a jar, a cloth. And the non-existence of that which is the object of perception cannot be possible.

Even if Advaita maintains that, from the *vyāvahārika* point of view, worldly entities exist, the problem of their connection with Brahman remains unsolved. To explain the relation, Advaita thinkers developed a number of strategies that, although not devised to make up a coherent and

systematic argumentation, can be seen as a multi-faceted attempt to resolve the monistic problem (and, incidentally, as a sign of its relevance to the history of the school). These strategies revolve around metaphysical ideas (*māyā*), as well as psychological/epistemological ones (*avidyā*); but they also hinge on a specific theory of causality (*satkāryavāda*) and on a theory of error (*adhyāsa, anirvacanīyatva*).

The most common way to explain the relationship between Brahman and the world lies in postulating the existence of an ontological power, or a ‘cosmic force’ – *māyā* –, which is in itself able to conceal the pure reality of Brahman and produce the phenomenal world. *Māyā* is thus both the power of illusion possessed by Brahman and the objects produced by that power. To explain the monistic issue recurring to *māyā* is an old strategy. The term is cited for the first time in RgVeda 10.54.2 and appears sixteen times in the *Māṇḍūkya-kārikās*. Strictly related to *māyā* is the idea that the inability to understand the unitary character of reality is caused by nescience (*avidyā*). In a sense *avidyā* can be seen as the epistemological counterpart of *māyā*: ordinary knowers are hindered by *avidyā* hence they experience *māyā*. But, vice versa, *avidyā* exists because of *māyā*. The relation between the two is so entangled that it is difficult to understand the boundaries of each concept and it has been argued that the two ideas are conflated in Śaṅkara (Mayeda 1965:179; Potter 1981:78-80). In VP *māyā* plays no role at all but the fact is coherent with Bhartṛhari’s ontological outlook: There is no need to assume the existence of a cosmic force once Brahman is conceived as having the capacity (*śakti*) to become different from itself due to its linguistic nature. *Avidyā*, on the other hand, has a much more evident function and is used from the very beginning of the treatise to explain Brahman’s relation to the world.¹⁶

Advaita thinkers employ a further strategy; they endorse a peculiar theory of causality which they subsequently transfer to a metaphysical plane. The theory, known as *satkāryavāda*, is based on the notion that in the process of causation no new effect arises from a given cause. Historically, the theory has been put forth into two different versions. The first one, maintained by Sāṃkhya (and possibly by Vedānta in its early stage, see Timalšina 2009:368) affirms that the cause really transforms itself into the effect (*pariṇāma-vāda*), whereas the second, advocated by scholastic Vedānta, deems the effect unreal: Effects appear just in so far as they are (falsely) perceived by ordinary knowers, but actually only the cause is real (*satkāraṇa-vāda*). The metaphysical implications of such an argument are obvious: Even if one perceives multiplicity (the effects), only Brahman (the cause) truly exists. Consider for instance the following passage from BSB 2.1.15:

*itaś ca kāraṇād ananyatvaṃ kāryasya, yatkāraṇaṃ bhāva eva kāraṇasya kāryam
upalabhyate, nābhāve. tadyathā satyāṃ mṛdi ghaṭa upalabhyate satsu ca tantuṣu
pataḥ [...].*

Hence there is no difference between cause and effect, since the effect of a cause is cognized only when the cause is present, not when the cause is not present. For example, a jar is cognized when there is clay and a cloth when there are threads.

Two last strategies remain to be discussed. They are based on the notions of *adhyāsa* and *anirvacanīyatva*. If *avidyā* is the epistemological state of affairs every ordinary knower experiences, *adhyāsa* is the cause of that state of affairs. A sign of its crucial role is that Śaṅkara discusses the term right at the beginning of BSB:

*yuṣmadasmadpratyayagocarayor viṣayaviṣayiṇos tamaḥprakāśavad
viruddhasvabhāvayor itaretarabhāvānupapattau siddhāyām, taddharmānām api
sutarām itaretarabhāvānupapattiḥ. ity ato 'smatpratyayagocare viṣayiṇi cidātmake*

¹⁶ The use of *avidyā* in the VP and its being a possible influence for the Advaita milieu is studied in Timalšina 2009. Here it suffices to say that, unlike certain positions of scholastic Advaita, in Bhartṛhari *avidyā* is an intrinsic feature of Brahman and is not external to it. The *Vṛtti* makes that point explicit and defines Brahman as *vidyāvidyāpravibhāgarūpam* (VP p. 2, l. 1).

yuṣmatpratyayagocarasya viṣayasya taddharmānām cādhyāsaḥ, tadviparyayeṇa viṣayiṇas taddharmānām ca viṣaye 'dhyāso mithyeti bhavitum yuktam.

Once established that it is impossible to prove a reciprocal relationship between object and subject the domains of which are the notions of 'you' and 'I' and – like darkness and light – are of an opposite nature, it is all the more impossible to prove a reciprocal relationship as far as their qualities are concerned. Hence, it is correct to say that to superimpose the object and its qualities, whose domain is the notion of 'you', on the subject and its qualities, whose domain is the notion of 'I' and is pure consciousness, as well as, conversely, to superimpose the subject and its qualities on the object, is erroneous.

Then Śaṅkara goes on with a series of definitions:

(1) *ko 'yam adhyāso nāmeti. ucyate, smṛtirūpaḥ paratra pūrvadr̥ṣṭāvbhāsaḥ.*

What is meant by the term 'superimposition'? We answer: the appearance, in the form of remembrance, of something previously perceived in another thing.

(2) *taṁ kecid anyatrānyadharmādhyāsa iti vadanti.*

Some indeed define it as the superimposition of the qualities of something on something else.

(3) *kecit tu yatra yadadhyāsas tadvivekāgrahanibandhano bhrama iti.*

But according to others, the superimposition of one thing on another is the error caused by the non-apprehension of the distinction between that on which something is superimposed and that which is superimposed.

(4) *anye tu yatra yadadhyāsas tasyaiva viparītadharmatvakalpanām ācakṣate.*

But others again affirm that superimposition of one thing on another is the false attribution of wrong qualities to the thing on which something is superimposed.

All these definitions share a common feature highlighted by Śaṅkara as follows:

sarvathāpi tv anyasyānyadharmāvbhāsatām na vyabhicarati.

Anyway [all these definitions] do not go beyond [the idea] that the quality of a thing appears in another thing.

The question is also taken up in UPS 1.18.21-22:

*so 'dhyāso neti netīti prāptavat pratiṣedhyate/
bhūyo 'dhyāsavidhiḥ kaścit kutaścīn nopapadyate//
ātmanīha yathādhyāsaḥ pratiṣedhas tathaiva ca/
malādhyāsanīṣedhau khe kriyete ca yathābudhaiḥ//*

This superimposition is negated, as if it were a thing acquired by the word, 'Not thus, not so!' Moreover no injunction based upon superimposition is at all reasonable. As superimposition is [made] upon Ātman, so [its] negation is [made from Ātman], just as the superimposition of dust upon the sky and its negation are therefore made by the unwise (Mayeda's translation; Mayeda 1979:174).

Thus superimposition works as follows: A subject cognizes a certain entity. By doing so s/he wrongly attributes to it some features belonging to other items s/he had previously come across which s/he remembers at the moment of cognition. The definitions contained in BSB are considered – since the earliest commentaries, such as Ānandagiri's *Nyāyanirṇaya* (13th c. CE) – examples of various theories of error endorsed in Indian speculation. In affirmation (2) Śaṅkara alludes to the theory that goes by the name of *anyathākhyāti*, traditionally advocated by Nyāya.¹⁷ Affirmation (3) refers to a slightly more complex theory, upheld by the Prābhākara school of Mīmāṃsā, known as *akhyāti*.¹⁸ Affirmation (4) refers to the *viparītākhyāti*, the theory supported by the Bhāṭṭa school of Mīmāṃsā.¹⁹ Apart from the ones mentioned by Śaṅkara, Indian philosophy knows of at least three other theories of error. The first one, known as *asatkhyāti*, represents the common view of Mādhyamika Buddhism.²⁰ A further theory, advocated by Yogācāra Buddhism, goes with the name of *ātmākhyāti*.²¹ Finally, the last way to explain erroneous judgments is to resort to the *anirvacanīyakhyāti*, which is considered the standard position of Advaita Vedānta.

In fact, the status of *anirvacanīyakhyāti* is a matter of debate among classical authors. It has been convincingly shown that the concept plays a minor role in Śaṅkara's doctrines²² and occurs for the first time in Maṇḍana Miśra's *Brahmasiddhi*. The full passage reads as follows:

*nāvidyā brahmaṇaḥ svabhāvaḥ, nārthāntaram, nātyantam asatī, nāpi satī, evam
eveyam avidyā māyā mithyāsvabhāsa ity ucyate. svabhāvaś cet kasyacit,
anyo'anyo vā paramārtha eveti nāvidyā, atyantāsattve khapuṣpasadrśī na
vyavahārāṅgam. tasmād anirvacanīyā (Brahmasiddhi p. 9).*

Avidyā is not the essence of Brahman, nor another thing; not absolutely non-existent, nor existent. It is just for this reason that it 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 (Thrasher's translation; Thrasher 1993:1).

¹⁷ According to this theory, every false perception consists of an act of misjudgment: One cognizes an object in place of another object. Such misjudgment has no bearing on the ontological status of the misconceived object. Resorting to the stock example, mistaking a rope for a snake does not imply that the snake (or the rope, for that matter) does not exist.

¹⁸ In this case the judgment 'this is a snake' used in reference to a 'rope' must be broken up into two parts. The first one consists of 'this' – since the pronoun represents the substratum of any cognition – whereas the second consists of 'snake'. The two are falsely identified because – as Śaṅkara says – there is no-apprehension (*akhyāti*) of their difference. But once a subsequent cognition falsifies the previous one, there is no apprehension of the snake, which is completely absent.

¹⁹ According to this view, somewhat similar to *anyathākhyāti*, in a judgment the error occurs when an "appropriate predicate is not applied and in lieu of that an opposite predicate is applied" (Kar 1978:55). The error consists thus of judging a thing as opposite (*viparīta*) to its real nature.

²⁰ The peculiar feature of an erroneous judgment, such as the one involving the rope and the snake, is the perception of something that is unreal (*asat*). Hence, the "erroneous perception is [...] 'non-being's apprehension" (Kar 1978: 94-95).

²¹ In accordance with its metaphysical stance, Yogācāra believes that error consists of deeming external what has an internal existence. Actually many schools of Buddhism uphold slightly different versions of *ātmākhyāti* (Kar 1978: 74-75).

²² The term appears in UPS 1.1.18 but in reference to *nāmarūpa*, the name used by Śaṅkara to indicate the evolutes of the *vyāvahārika* level of reality.

The *anirvacanīya* theory holds that the connection between a wrongly perceived thing (the snake) and a real thing (the rope) cannot be described as real or unreal. If the cognition of a snake were real, no subsequent cognition of a rope would be able to replace it. But, similarly, one could not say that the cognition of the snake is unreal: In that case no error would occur at all. The answer to the conundrum is ‘inexpressibility’: the snake in the cognition is neither real nor unreal, it is indeterminable (Kar 1978:117).

As in other schools, a theory initially developed to justify an erroneous cognition soon transcends the epistemological framework and starts to be used to corroborate a metaphysical vision. In our case the error in question becomes the error par excellence: the superimposition between Brahman and that which differs from it.

3. Vṛṣabhadeva and the status of reality

3.1 The use of *anirvacanīya*

Let me now turn the attention to the way Vṛṣabhadeva deals with the problems discussed so far. Among the various strategies Advaitavādins employ to tackle the monistic question one seems to be related to the SA, that of *anirvacanīya*. As shown above, the answer Advaitavādins give to the monistic conundrum amounts to saying that the members of this relationship are neither identical nor different. Choosing one of the two options would lead to fallacy. Now such an idea is not totally absent in the *Vṛtti*. One cannot find the same expression but an equivalent one, *anākhyeya*. The expression occurs in few passages of the text but there is only one instance which is relevant to metaphysics:

*vivartate rthabhāvena: ekasya tattvād apracyutasya bhedānu-
kāreṇāsatyavibhaktānyarūpopagrāhitā vivartaḥ. svapnaviṣayapratibhāsavat. uktam ca.
mūrtikriyāvivartāv avidyāśaktipravṛttimātram tau vidyātmani tattvānyatvābhyām anākhyeyau.
etad hy avidyāyā avidyātvam iti* (VP p. 8, l. 3; p. 9, ll. 1-3).

‘[Brahman] appears as meaning’: appearance is the appropriation by what is one and never loses its essence, of another form – differentiated and unreal – through the imitation of difference: like the manifestation of objects in dreams. It has been said: ‘the appearances of objects and actions are the mere activities of nescience and are not expressible (*anākhyeya*) in terms of identity or difference with what is in itself knowledge’. For, this is the being *avidyā* of *avidyā*.

As stated above, Maṇḍana is the first Advaita author who adopts the idea of *anirvacanīya* and the first one to provide its definition. A. Thrasher extensively discusses this passage in his study of Maṇḍana Mīśra’s *Brahmasiddhi* (Thrasher 1993). Thrasher, insightfully, suggests that Maṇḍana’s use of the term has been influenced by the author of the *Vṛtti*²³ or, more generally, by the *vyākaraṇa* milieu (Thrasher 1993:2-5). The suggestion is intriguing and absolutely possible, since Maṇḍana’s acquaintance with Bhartṛhari’s production is an established fact. Still, this does not mean that the influence can be easily proven. I see two kinds of problems, one conceptual, the other methodological. Whoever composed the *Vṛtti* accepted the idea that Brahman is endowed with

23 Thrasher clearly supports the idea of a separate authorship. See Thrasher 1993: 135.

powers, a fact in clear conflict with Maṇḍana's ideas on Brahman.²⁴ Moreover, and more importantly, the sole 'ontological' occurrence of the idea of inexpressibility in the *Vṛtti* is, clearly (see *uktaṃ ca* and Vṛṣabhadeva's remark in the commentary: *asmin vastuni pramāṇam āgamaṃ paṭhati*, VP p. 9, ll. 18-19), a quotation from a – presumably older – unknown source. Still these two issues do not invalidate the gist of Thrasher's argument, provided one assumes that Maṇḍana's sources were not just the *Vṛtti* but a larger group of grammatical works most of which are lost to us.²⁵ Is Vṛṣabhadeva's *Sphuṭākṣarā* part of this cluster? It is difficult to say and rather unsound to establish connections without explicit references. Hence, I only note that the idea of 'inexpressibility' is much more systematic in the *Sphuṭākṣarā* than in the *Vṛtti*. And, more importantly, Vṛṣabhadeva expresses the notion always using the same term, *anirvacanīya*. The following occurrences are taken from the commentary on the first four *kārikās*:

(1) *tena tattvānyatvābhyām anirvacanīyābhīḥ śaktibhiḥ samāviṣṭam iti. yadi punar brahmānekaśaktiyogāt tathā pratyavabhāṣate katham sarvaparikalpātītattvam iti, katham anekaśaktiyoge 'pi tathā pratyavabhāṣate. śaktayaś caitā, yadi brahmaṇas tattvānyatvābhyām anirvacanīyā na tarhi śaśaviṣṇavat santi* (VP p. 4, ll. 3-6).

Hence [Brahman] is pervaded by powers that are inexpressible in terms of identity or difference to it. Again, if Brahman appears in that way due to its multiple powers, how can its nature be 'beyond every conceptual construction'? How does it appear so, even in connection with multiple powers? And these powers, if are inexpressible in terms of identity or difference to Brahman, do not exist, they are like the hare's horns.

(2) *yad uktaṃ na tarhi śaktayaḥ santi, tattvānyatvābhyām anirvacanīyatvāt, śaśaviṣṇavad iti* (VP p. 9, ll. 17-18).

It is said that these powers do not exist, because they are inexpressible in terms of identity or difference [to Brahman], just like the hare's horns.

(3) *anākhyyāy ity anirvacanīyau* (VP p. 9, ll. 25-26).

Anākhyyau stands for 'inexpressible'.

(4) *tad etac chāntam api tayety avidyayā grastam iva grhītam iva. asatyatvāc ca grāmasya ivaśabdopādānam. kayety uktaṃ. tatrāha yā nirvaktum na śakyata iti. tattvānyatvābhyām anirvacanīyatayeti* (VP p. 13, ll. 8-10).

This [Brahman], although pacified, is as if swallowed, i.e. grasped, by that one, i.e. by nescience. The expression 'as if it were' (*iva*) has been used because such multitude is unreal. [It has been swallowed] by what? By 'what it is impossible to express', [the author] says. For it is impossible to be expressed in terms of identity or difference.

(5) *tāsām ca svarūpatām āha. tattvānyatvābhyām anirvacanīyāḥ. na tattvam, brahmaṇo 'nekatvaprasaṅgāt. prthagānupalambhān nānyatvam* (VP p. 21, ll. 12-14).

He says the own nature of those [powers]: they are inexpressible in terms of identity or

²⁴ Thrasher acknowledges this problem and assumes that Maṇḍana drew from Bhartṛhari only what he deemed relevant to the development of his own speculation. See Thrasher 1993:4.

²⁵ Vṛṣabhadeva affirms that many commentaries on VP already existed before his time. See VP p.1, l. 10.

difference. There is no identity since that would imply that Brahman is not one. There is no otherness either because they are not perceived as separate [from Brahman].

The concept is thus more wide-ranging than in the *Vṛtti* and Vṛṣabhadeva's recurrent use of it hardly adventitious. It is worth noting that in one case (number 3) *anirvacanīya* is used to gloss *anākhya* in the *Vṛtti*. On the whole it seems that Vṛṣabhadeva was more aware than Bhartṛhari of the technical use of the term (or, for that matter, more than whoever composed the *Vṛtti*).

3.2. Levels of reality

As previously discussed, there is no evidence that Bhartṛhari had in mind a reality differentiated into levels, as the Advaitavādins had. There is no doubt that according to him the experience of Brahman represents the ultimate step of awareness, but this does not imply that entities of the ordinary world are unreal. Vṛṣabhadeva does not question Bhartṛhari's basic tenet – the fact that reality is intrinsically linguistic – yet there are instances which suggest that he had a different ontological picture in mind, somewhat similar to Advaitavādins'. To begin with, there are several passages in which he openly affirms that entities of the ordinary world do not enjoy a totally real condition:

(1) *na ca teṣām asatyānām sragādyākārānām tatra pravibhāgo 'satyatvāt* (VP p. 4, l. 21).

There is no division in that [Brahman] since these forms like a garland and so forth are unreal.

(2) *sarvaparikalpātītataṭṭve 'pi brahmaṇy avidyānibandhanaḥ pravibhāgo yo 'yaṁ deśakālādikṛto gavādikṛtaś cety avidyānibandhanatvāc cāsatyaḥ* (VP p. 5, ll. 2-3).

Although Brahman is of a nature which transcends every conceptualization [its] division in terms of space and time etc. and in terms of a cow and so on, is based on nescience and, in so far as it is based on nescience, it is unreal.

(3) *vibhaktam avibhaktam ca. tad eva vibhakta, tāvat pratyavabhāsamānākāraparigraheṇa ghaṭo 'yaṁ paṭo 'yam iti. asatyatvāc ca pratyavabhāsayāvibhaktam. ata eva tad ekaṁ bhedasyaśatyatvāt* (VP p. 5, ll. 24-25; p. 6, l. 2).

[Brahman] is divided and undivided. To begin with it is divided because it embraces manifested forms such as 'this is a pot', 'this is a cloth'. And it is undivided because such manifestation is unreal. Thus [Brahman] is unitary because differentiation is unreal.

(4) *anyām iva ity abhidheyāt. asatyatvāc ca bhedasya ivaśabdaḥ* (VP p. 8, l. 9).

'As if [the word] were 'different' from meaning. And the expression 'as if' is used because differentiation is unreal.

(5) *gavādivikāramātrā na santi satyatayeti kathayati nirvikāram iti* (VP p. 13, ll. 21-22).

The author says ‘unchangeable’ (*nirvikāra*) because mere transformations such as cows etc., do not exist in reality.

(6) *asatyarūpa iti. pravibhajyanta iti pravibhāgā bhoktrādayas te ‘satyarūpāḥ* (VP p. 21, ll. 18-19).

‘Whose nature is falsely differentiated’ (*asatyarūpa*) means that divisions — i.e. what is divided — like the experiencer etc., are of an unreal nature.

In these passages the entities of the phenomenal world seem to be considered mere appearances and linked to the idea of nescience (*avidyā*). This offers a picture that is more problematic than the one presented in Bhartṛhari’s texts: Only one entity is absolutely real — Brahman — whereas all other things, though perceived, are ultimately unreal.

Still, to further complicate the picture, there are instances when Vṛṣabhadeva seems to consider a different stance, in which the difference between reality and unreality is not cut so sharply:

(1) *asti cāsatyarūpam eva. gavādyanekākārāvabhāso ‘syāpīti vibhaktagrahaṇam. asatyam api tadrūpaṃ parasya vibhaktam eveti* (VP p. 8, l. 18-19).

An unreal form also exists. The author uses the word ‘distinguished’ because this [Brahman] also possesses the manifestation of multiple forms, like cows and so forth. Although this form is unreal, it is distinguished from another one.

(2) *vibhāgenaiva tatrākāro bhavātīti. athavā tattvād apracyutasye iti vacanād anyarūpopagrahe ‘py ekarūpatā syāt. tataś cānekagavādyarthāvagraho na syād iti vibhaktagrahaṇam. prāyeṇa ca padārthāḥ paṭādayo ‘nyasya kusumāde rūpam upagrhṇantaḥ svarūpaparityāgena dṛṣṭāḥ, sphaṭikādayaś coparāgarūpam. iha tathā nety āha tattvād apracyutasye iti. anyarūpopagrahe ‘pi tatsvarūpāpracyutir iti* (VP p. 8, ll. 22-26).

A form exists in [Brahman] in terms of division. Or the expression ‘non-losing its essence’, would mean that [Brahman] is of a unitary nature (*ekarūpatā*), even when it assumes another form. Hence there would be no distinction between multiple objects, like cows and so on. Therefore the word ‘divided’ is used. And generally speaking, objects like a cloth and so forth, when they acquire the form of another thing, like a flower, etc., are seen [to do so] by losing their own nature: Crystals and so forth acquire a colored form. Here it is not the case, for the author says ‘does not lose its essence’: even by assuming another form [Brahman] does not lose its own form.

Differently from the previous ones, these passages seem to credit some kind of reality to the ordinary world: standard phenomena of course do not share the same status of Brahman but, from the ordinary point of view, they do exist since they are undoubtedly perceived.

The only way to make sense out of these data is to consider the possibility that Vṛṣabhadeva is accepting a core distinction of Advaita exegesis: the existence of two different ways of understanding reality, one pertaining to the supreme Brahman (*paramārtha*), the other one to ordinary reality (*vyavahāra*). The endorsement of this approach is evident if one considers the following passages:

vidyārūpam aṅgīkṛtyoktaṃ sarvavikalpātītataṭṭvam iti. avidyānibandhanarūpam aṅgīkṛtyoktaṃ samāviṣṭaṃ sarvābhiḥ śaktibhir iti (VP p. 4, ll. 8-10).

The expression ‘its nature transcends every conceptual construction’ (*sarvavikalpātītataṭṭvam*) is affirmed from the point of view of that form [of Brahman] that is knowledge. The expression ‘pervaded by all powers’ (*samāviṣṭaṃ sarvābhiḥ śaktibhiḥ*) is affirmed from the point of view of that form [of Brahman] that is based on nescience.

More specifically, the expressions *paramārtha* and its adverbial counterpart, *paramārthatas*, are frequent in the *Sphuṭākṣarā*. In most cases their use is ontologically relevant:

(1) *paramārthato vyaktāpi vāg buddhyadhiṣṭhānaiveti* (VP p. 8, ll. 10-11).

From an absolute point of view the word, even when manifested, has intellect as its sole support.

(2) *naikatvam, vidyāvidyayor virodhāt. na nānātvam, paramārthato brahmavyatiriktavastvabhāvāt* (VP p. 9, ll. 26-27).

There is no unity because of the opposition between knowledge and nescience; there is no multiplicity either because, from an absolute point of view, there is nothing distinct from Brahman.

(3) *paramārthato nirbhāgaḥ svataḥ kālaḥ* (VP p. 19, l. 17).

From an absolute point of view time is in itself devoid of divisions.

(4) *śaktibhyaḥ sakāśād aprthaktve’pi prthaktveneva vṛttiḥ, na tu paramārthataḥ prthaktvam iti* (VP p. 14, ll. 24-25).

Though not different from the powers, [Brahman] exists as it were different [from them]; but from an absolute point of view there is no differentiation.

(5) *paramārthata eko’pi vedāḥ śiṣṭair abhedasya kathayitum aśakyatvāt sthānakaraṇābhigātabhedena prāpitabhedaś* (VP p. 26, ll. 11-13).

Even if on the absolute level Veda is one, the learned men, unable to express its oneness made [the Veda] acquire differentiation by distinguishing contact, places and organs of articulation.

Conversely, in the *kārikās* and in the *Vṛtti*, the opposition between a *pāramārthika* and a *vyāvahārika* level is irrelevant. A quick survey of the occurrences is revealing. *Paramārtha* does not occur either in the *Vṛtti* or in the stanzas of the first chapter. *Vyavahāra* and the corresponding adjective *vyāvahārika* are quite common but they are neither used in opposition to *paramārtha* nor with a clear ontological value.²⁶ The word is employed either in its standard meaning of ‘mundane activity’ or,

²⁶ The words *paramārtha/paramārthatas* occur four times in the *kārikās* of the second and third *kāṇḍa*: VP 2.22; 3.6.26; 3.7.39; 3.8.46. The only relevant instances for our discussion are 3.6.26 and 3.7.39. In both cases one may go so far as to think that Bhartṛhari, too, distinguished the two levels. Quite interestingly Helārāja mentions *vyavahāra* in commenting

with the technical meaning of ‘ordinary linguistic communication’.²⁷

3.3 Further points: causality and Vedāntic metaphors

There are two further reasons suggestive of proximity between the *Sphuṭākṣarā* and Advaita Vedānta, although certainly less cogent than the previous ones: the kind of causality endorsed by Vṛṣabhadeva and the use of Vedāntic metaphors. The problem of causality is not particularly expanded in the first chapter of VP (apart from the definition of Brahman as primeval cause, plus some cursory remarks concerning the status of time as the ‘concomitant cause’ of all effects) and probably Bhartṛhari had no intention to provide a comprehensive theory of causality. Vṛṣabhadeva shares the same attitude but nevertheless makes some insightful remarks on this point. The following passages show quite patently that he conceives the process of causation in terms of *satkāryavāda*:

(1) *tad eva brahma kāryam, tato 'vyatirekāt. ghaṭādīnāṃ ca kāraṇaṃ tad eva. ato na tābhyām asyātmā vyatiricyate. Anenotpādayayābhāvam āha. kāryam utpādya kāraṇaṃ vinaśyati. utpādayayayor ekasmāc ca brahmaṇo 'vyatirekāt kāryakāraṇayor apy ekatvam iti. kim utpadyate kiṃ nirudhyate vā* (VP p. 5, ll. 20-24).

This Brahman is the effect because it is not different from that [effect]. But that [Brahman] is also the cause of a pot and so forth. Its nature is therefore not different from both [cause and effect]. With this the author affirms that there is neither creation nor destruction: having produced an effect the cause disappears. But there is also identity between cause and effect, since creation and destruction are not different from the unitary Brahman; then, what is produced or what disappears?

(2) *na punaḥ kiṃcin nivartate jāyate veti* (VP p. 9, l. 10).

Again, nothing disappears or arises.

3) *kāraṇasādharmatām kāryasyācaṣṭe* (VP p. 31, ll. 20-21).

He says that cause and effect are the same.

The possibly least cogent proof of Vṛṣabhadeva’s closeness to Vedānta is the use in the *Sphuṭākṣarā* of metaphors that are well attested in the Vedānta tradition (although they are not peculiar to this school only), a further device to explain the rather inexplicable relationship between the metaphysical principle and the world. Vṛṣabhadeva employs two well-known metaphors: the first one is that of the snake and the rope, used in the Advaita literature since Gauḍapāda’s *kārikās*, for example in *Māṇḍūkya-kārikās* 2.17:

*aniścitā yathā rajjur andhakāre vikalpitā /
sarpadhārādibhir bhāvais tadvad ātmā vikalpitaḥ //*

3.7.39. However, even conceding that Bhartṛhari might have in mind such a distinction, it is puzzling that he never uses *paramārtha* in the first chapter, certainly the most appropriate context to deal with the question.

27 It is striking to see how Vṛṣabhadeva applies this notion to all metaphysical problems treated at the beginning of VP. The idea of a *pāramārthika* level of awareness is used to explain how a unitary thing can be perceived as different. It is applied in the case of the oneness of language (see passage 1), in the case of the absence of differentiation between ordinary entities and Brahman (passage 2), in the case of the lack of differentiation in time (passage 3), and in the case of the identity between Brahman and powers (passage 4).

Just like in darkness a not-recognized rope is conceptualized as entities like a snake, a water-line and so forth, thus the Self is conceptualized.

Or again in BSB 1.1.4:

*nanu vastumātrakathane 'pi rajjur iyaṃ nāyaṃ sarpa ityādau
bhrāntijanitabhūtinivartanenārthatvaṃ dr̥ṣṭam.*

One may object: even in informing [someone] about the true nature of an object, as in the case: 'this is a rope, this is not a snake', etc., usefulness is observed, because there is the removal of the fear caused by the error.

The second one is the analogy of the crystal, which is attested in Śāṅkara, for instance in BSB 1.3.19:

*prāg vivekavijñānotpatteḥ śarīrendriyamanobuddhiviśayavedanopādhibhir aviviktam iva
jīvasya dr̥ṣṭyādiḥ svarūpaṃ bhavati, yathā śuddhasya sphaṭikasya svācchyaṃ
śauklyam ca svarūpaṃ prāg vivekagrahaṇād raktanīlādyupādhibhir aviviktam iva
bhavati.*

The own nature of the soul, which is the light of knowledge, etc., – before the rise of a discriminating knowledge – appears as not detached from adjuncts like the cognitions of the objects of intellect, mind, senses and body. In the same way – before the obtainment of discriminative knowledge – the own nature of a pure crystal, which is purity and transparency, appears as not detached from adjuncts like red or blue etc.

Maṇḍana uses the analogy too, for instance in this passage from *Brahmasiddhi* 1.39:

*yathopadhānatirohitarūpasphaṭikamaṇer upadhyavakarṣaṇam
svarūpābhivyaktaye 'pekṣate tatthehāpi draṣṭavyam. na hi sphaṭikamaṇeḥ pūrvarūpaṃ
vinaṣṭam upadhānasannidheḥ, tadapagame vānyad utpannam.*

Just like in order to reveal the own nature of a crystal, the essence of which is concealed by adjuncts, the removal of the adjuncts is required, the same must be seen also [here]. For, the original nature of the crystal is not destroyed by the presence of the adjuncts. Nor something else is produced by the adjuncts' removal.

In the commentary on the first four stanzas the *Sphuṭākṣarā* employs the rope-snake metaphor twice. The first passage has already been quoted above:

- (1) *yathaiva rajjudravyam sraksarpakhatvikādirūparahitam api
tadavabhāsanānimittabhūtābhiḥ parasparavyāvṛttarūpābhir yogyatābhis
tattvānyatvam atikrāntābhir adhyāsitaṃ satyāsatarūpaṃ* (VP p. 4, ll. 19-21).

It is like in the case of a substance such as 'rope'. Even if it does not have the form of a

garland, a snake, a <bedstead> or something else, a nature neither real nor unreal is superimposed on that substance, on the basis of capacities the natures of which are mutually opposed, transcend the concept of identity and difference to the substance, and are the causes of the manifestation of those [illusory things].

(2) *yathā rajjudravyaṃ viparyastadarśanānām acetanārūpam ajahat sarparūpānukāreṇa sarparūpam ity ucyate* (VP p. 9, ll. 6-7).

For example, among erroneous cognitions, a substance [such as] rope, even if it does not abandon its inanimate form, is said to have the form of a snake by imitating the form of a snake.

The metaphor of the crystal appears in another passage mentioned above:

prāyeṇa ca padārthāḥ paṭādayo 'nyasya kusumāde rūpam upagrṇantaḥ svarūpaparityāgena drṣṭāḥ, sphaṭikādayaś coparāgarūpam. iha tathā nety āha tattvād apracyutasya iti. anyarūpopagrahe 'pi tatsvarūpāpracyutir iti (VP p. 8, ll. 22-26).

And generally speaking, objects like a cloth and so forth, when they acquire the form of another thing, like a flower, etc., are seen [to do so] by losing their own nature: Crystals and so forth acquire a colored form. Here it is not the case, for the author says 'does not lose its essence': even by assuming another form [Brahman] does not lose its own form.

Conclusions

From the discussion above one may draw the following conclusions:

- 1) Vṛṣabhadeva uses the notion of *anirvacanīya* in a technical sense. Even if the idea of "inexpressibility" is traceable in Bhartṛhari's texts what is at stake here is Vṛṣabhadeva's lexical choice. The commentator systematically glosses with *anirvacanīya* the few instances where the *Vṛtti* hints at the notion of 'inexpressibility'. As repeatedly noticed above, the term *anirvacanīya* is a characteristic feature of a specific strand of Advaita, that of Maṇḍana Mīśra. This means either that Vṛṣabhadeva was acquainted with Maṇḍana's literary production or that, following Thrasher's lead, the *Sphuṭākṣarā* is among the works Maṇḍana drew on for construing his own formulation of inexpressibility. To determine which of the two options is more accurate is not easy, but this does not mean that the whole discussion is inconclusive. In fact, in both cases, the use of the term is historically meaningful. In the former case one may evince that Vṛṣabhadeva's historical collocation is contemporary or later to that of Maṇḍana Mīśra. In the latter, one has at least to acknowledge that Maṇḍana's use of *anirvacanīya* has a clear antecedent. If one relies on the scant biographical data put forth in the *maṅgalaśloka*s of the commentary, 8th c. CE seems to be a plausible date for this author (Iyer 1969: 44-45). This would make Vṛṣabhadeva a contemporary of Maṇḍana Mīśra, hence the latter a possible source for him. Nevertheless the other option (for the sake simplicity, Thrasher's hypothesis) is viable too. In this second case Vṛṣabhadeva should be collocated earlier than Maṇḍana (either in the 6th or the 7th c. CE, see Iyer 1969: 44-45 and Coward/Raja 1990:179) and considered as a possible source for Maṇḍana's use of *anirvacanīya*.

- 2) Vṛṣabhadeva is more prone than Bhartṛhari to accept the idea that reality is differentiated into levels, as shown by the recurrent use of the opposition between *paramārtha* and *vyavahāra*. Such an opposition, though largely adopted in Buddhist philosophy,²⁸ is evidently a peculiar trait of Advaita Vedānta and, to my knowledge, is not present in the Brahmanical milieu hitherto the establishment of Advaita as a scholastic tradition.

Less cogent, yet suggestive of proximity between Advaita and Vṛṣabhadeva, are the following facts:

- 3) As Advaitavādins do, Vṛṣabhadeva endorses a *satkāryavāda* theory of causation.
- 4) He uses metaphors that are well attested in the Advaita Vedānta tradition.

All this suggests that Vṛṣabhadeva belonged to an intellectual environment which is somehow close to scholastic Advaita. The relationship between this school and the *Vākyapadīya*'s sphere is an established fact; it has been the object of recent scholarship (Timalsina 2009) and new proofs will likely emerge in the future to further corroborate the link. The two sides share the same intellectual background and a common set of notions. Such notions evidently underwent historical development but they were probably also adjusted to the purposes of each treatise and used accordingly. That might be the case of Vṛṣabhadeva: he certainly was an intellectual well versed in *vyākaraṇa* and a reliable interpreter of the *Brahmakāṇḍa* but, as any good commentator, he might also have the necessity of understanding the older material with the hermeneutical tools typical of his own time.²⁹

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²⁸ The oldest occurrence is in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.10 (2nd c. CE).

²⁹ "Since the commentators are most concerned with resolving inconsistencies, and since resolutions to old problems lead to new critiques, each generation of commentators is thus responding to a new set of concerns typical of that era". This insightful remark made by John D. Dunne (Dunne 2004:6) about Dharmakīrti's commentarial tradition can be painlessly extended to the whole commentarial tradition of classical India and is true also in the case of Vṛṣabhadeva.

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