

Bhartṛhari and verbal testimony: a ‘hyper-antireductionist’ approach?

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The grammarian and philosopher Bhartṛhari (5th. c. CE) developed a philosophy that is essentially characterized by the prominent role language has in structuring humans’ efforts to cope with reality. Within this broader picture, he adopted an epistemological standpoint that was somehow at odds with the standard view of other South Asian thinkers, usually founded on a careful and systematic distinction of the means able to lead to a reliable cognitive event (technically called *pramāṇas*). Bhartṛhari claimed that such an interpretation is rather artificial, and that a cognition is actually a multifaceted process, whose single components are almost always hard to pinpoint. His main theoretical contribution consists of affirming that such a multifaceted cognitive act is informed and shaped by language.

The article deals with Bhartṛhari’s epistemology by discussing the author’s opinion on the nature of testimony. Furthermore, it addresses the question whether pure inference should always be regarded as an accurate way of acquiring knowledge.

In a comprehensive evaluation of Indian philosophy, the role played by the grammarian Bhartṛhari (5th c. CE)¹ is hard to understate. Although he formally took no part in the trends which mostly contributed to the classical phase of Indian thought – namely that process of mutual interaction between Brahmanical schools, mainly Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā, and their principal opponents, in particular the so called logical-epistemological school of Buddhism – his influence was widespread and his views carefully assessed by both supporters and opponents. Scholars have revealed the presence of his ideas in many facets of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions (Bronkhorst 1992, 1993, 1999, 2012; Dwivedi 1991; Lindtner 1993; Torella 2008; Timalsina 2009). Yet, Bhartṛhari’s masterpiece, the *Vākyapadīya* (henceforth VP) can hardly be regarded as a conventional philosophical text (Aklujkar 2002, 209). It is indeed an extensive treatise meant to analyze all aspects of language by combining perspectives which can be categorized, depending on the circumstances, as typical of the indigenous grammatical tradition (*vyākaraṇa*), as proximate to general linguistics, or as close to the

¹ On Bhartṛhari’s date see Frauwallner 1961. But if one were to accept an earlier date for the Buddhist Pramāṇavādins, as proposed by Krasser, Bhartṛhari’s date should be pushed back to the 4th c. CE (Krasser 2012).

philosophy of language. A sign of the peculiarity of the VP as a philosophical text is the absence of a detailed analysis of the means (*pramāṇas*) leading to correct knowledge (*pramiti*), a topic which usually received much attention in the works of classical philosophers (Iyer 1969, 83). This was probably due both to the status of the VP and to the purposes of the author: although Bhartrhari was probably aware that his work would lead grammar well beyond the limits set by his predecessors, he nonetheless chose not to adopt the conventions of the philosophical genre,² thus giving to the work that hybrid flavor that is probably one of its most distinctive features.

All this does not imply that the VP is silent on epistemology. The philosophical views expounded in the text are so pervasive that no area of philosophy remains unaffected, and knowledge is no exception. The scholarly discussion on Bhartrhari's epistemology is not abundant. Its general features have been investigated by Subramania Iyer and Ashok Aklujkar (Iyer 1969, 83–97; Aklujkar 1970, 1989a, 1989b and 2002) and valuable studies are available on more specific questions (Dragonetti–Tola 1990, Akamatsu 1993 and 1999, Vergiani 2012, Todeschini 2010, Torella 2013). In the following I will offer an interpretation of Bhartrhari's epistemological standpoint by highlighting its internal consistency as well as its being in harmony with other aspects of his thought. Furthermore, in section 3, I will try to glean Bhartrhari's ideas on 'verbal testimony' and to conjecture which position he would have assumed if he had known the Western contemporary debate on the issue.

1. Bhartrhari's epistemological stance

Bhartrhari's main theoretical stance is characterized by a strong, recurrent idea, namely that the whole prevails over the parts so that the very idea of parts is eventually unreal. The fact is stated very clearly from an ontological standpoint, but it is also true as far as epistemology and analysis of meaning are concerned. These three aspects are bound together and molded by the same theoretical pattern operating on different levels of analysis. The most crucial affirmation the VP makes on epistemology is a clear example of this attitude: Bhartrhari explicitly holds that any cognition is language-based and that conceiving knowledge without the medium of language is untenable.³ The

² Or, simply, the conventions of the philosophical genre were not fully established yet. It seems that within the Brahmanical milieu – without considering mentions of and quotations from lost works – a commentarial tradition did not arise before the 5th c. CE (the earliest extant commentaries being possibly Vātsyāyana's *Nyāyabhāṣya* and Śabara's *Bhāṣya* on the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, the dates of which are also uncertain).

³ VP 1.131: *na so 'sti pratyayo loka yaḥ śabdānugamād rte /
anuviddham iva jñānaṃ sarvaṃ śabdeṇa bhāṣate //*

statement is subtle and has an impact on ontology: Bhartṛhari is defending the idea that in order to have cognitions, a cognized object, in technical terms a *prameya*, must necessarily have something in common with the knower (*pramātr*).⁴ Both in fact share the same basic feature, that is, the capability of being expressed through language. The affirmation implies that it is too simple to limit language to its phenomenal and audible state. Language is more than that: it is the principle which permeates all knowable entities, including inert ones. This strong position is by itself an explicit critique of alternative theories of cognition (in which language is instead seen as an epistemological impediment),⁵ and constitutes the framework within which the entire epistemological standpoint of the VP must be assessed.

First, although there is scholarly consensus on the fact that Bhartṛhari generally deals with three means of knowledge – perception, inference and verbal testimony – (Aklujkar 1989a; Todeschini 2010) it is clear that for him the common systematization of the process of knowledge in terms of *pramāṇas* is merely conventional (Aklujkar 1989a, 151–152). If knowledge is always imbued with language, splitting it into perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), verbal testimony (*śabda*), and so on, may be practically convenient but it is ultimately misleading.⁶ Furthermore, he seems

“In the world there is no cognition without the implication of language.

All knowledge is manifested as if permeated by language”.

⁴ The linguistic nature of the *prameya* is evincible from the very first stanza of the VP in which *śabdabrahman* is said to manifest itself as *artha*, that is, as object/meaning. As for the *pramātr*, we are dealing with a context in which the differentiation between subject (*pramātr*) and object (*prameya*), although apparently manifested, is held to be unreal. The *Vṛtti* on VP 1.54 is a typical example in which the capacity of a word (that is to say of a cognition, every act of knowledge being dependent on words) to illuminate and that of being illuminated are clearly equated: *te cāsya pratipādyapratipādakaśakti nityām ātmabhūte pṛthaktveneṇa pratyavabhāsete*. Moreover, other passages in the *Vṛtti* (for example the one on VP 1.1: *tasyaikam api caitanyaṃ bahudhā pravibhajyate*) clearly identify Brahman, hence language, with the individual consciousness.

⁵ I am referring to the position of the Buddhist *Pramāṇavādins*. According to the founder of the school, Dignāga, possibly a younger contemporary of Bhartṛhari, the only real entities are the instantaneous and non-extended particulars (called *svalakṣaṇas*), which are linguistically inexpressible. *Pramāṇavādins*' position is in a sense opposed to Bhartṛhari's: for them, language is crucial in providing the illusory awareness of entities extended in time and space, thus giving shape to a conceptualized kind of knowledge which is ultimately false. In this regard, Dharmakīrti's statement that “conceptual elaboration is nescience” (*vikalpa eva hy avidyā*) is quite indicative. See *Pramāṇavārttikasavvṛtti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1.98–1.99 ab.

⁶ In this regard, it is interesting to note that Abhinavagupta (11th c. CE), the well-known Kashmiri polymath, whose philosophy was deeply indebted to Bhartṛhari, assumed a similar stance:

prakāśo nāma yaś cāyaṃ sarvatraiva prakāśate/

anapahnnavaniyāt kiṃ tasmin mānakalpanaiḥ// Tantrāloka 1.54

apahnutau sādhanē vā vastūnām ādyam idrśam/

ambiguous on the role human reason plays in the epistemological process. Such ambiguity is particularly displayed in a specific section of the VP (1.30 to 1.43) in which language is mostly identified with the notion of ‘tradition’ (*āgama*, see below for further details). This section contains a critique of the reliability of reason, alongside an explicit affirmation of the supremacy of traditional teaching over other means to gaining knowledge. The syllogism apparently followed in that section runs somewhat as follows: if language is identical to traditional teaching and is the common trait of any valid cognition, any valid cognition will be necessarily bound to tradition and, therefore, reasoning will play a minor role in human knowledge. Scholars have tried to temper Bhartrhari’s critique by pointing out that this section explicitly deals with matters concerning *dharma*.⁷ According to this interpretation the author would maintain the supremacy of traditional knowledge *only* regarding actions having ‘non-visible purposes’,⁸ whereas in all other cases the use of reason is not only admitted but also helpful. Although there is little doubt that in parts of this context Bhartrhari is explicitly speaking of dharmic matters, I believe that limiting the import of the criticism of reasoning only to actions having supra-sensorial purposes would imply a misunderstanding of his epistemology. I will try to show below how Bhartrhari’s approach can be better understood by expanding the import of the concept of ‘traditional knowledge’ without downplaying the role of reason in human cognitions.

The stanzas I mentioned above (VP 1.30 to 1.43) give a fair account of the way the author understands the cognitive process. The section starts with a clear acknowledgment of the role traditional knowledge (*āgama*) plays in establishing the results of actions with non-visible effects. In determining such results the *Vṛtti* affirms that “in establishing the results of actions which have non visible purposes the knowledge of the proper nature of things is strictly bound to traditional

yat tatra ke pramāṇānām upapattyupayogite// Tantrāloka 1.57

“This light in question shines everywhere,

and being impossible to deny it, what is the use of the means of knowledge?

Both in negating and establishing things, since there is always that original [reality], what are the reason and the use of the means of knowledge?”

⁷ A. Aklujkar maintains that: “B(hartṛhari) nowhere declares *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* to be unacceptable or always unreliable” (Aklujkar 1989a, 153). Todeschini too seems to endorse the position (Todeschini 2010, 107).

⁸ Generally speaking, actions which have implications within the sphere of *dharma* and whose effects are not perceived because they ripe in the future. The *Vṛtti* on VP 1.7 offers a short list of these actions: *adrṣṭaprayojanā bhakṣyābhakṣyagamyāgamyavācyāvācyaviṣayāḥ*. “actions which have an invisible purpose are the ones regarding what can be eaten and what cannot, with whom one can have an intercourse and with whom not, what can be said and what not”.

knowledge”.⁹ The text then goes on asking bluntly: “For, how can one trust human reasoning, which never reaches any conclusion and whose [judgments of] identity and difference are not established?”¹⁰ Soon after, as in a musical *crescendo*, the criticism is directed at logical reasoning *par excellence*, inference (*anumāna*): “Due to the difference of condition, space and time in the various powers, the attainment of things on the basis of inference is extremely difficult”.¹¹ The gist of the argument is given in the *Vṛtti*: establishing an inference is hard because a proper invariable concomitance (*vyāpti*) between *probans* (*vyāpya*) and *probandum* (*vyāpaka*) is observed very rarely. In fact, ordinary things are liable to modify their properties according to space (“The contact with mountain water is extremely cold, whereas the contact with the same water in a pot or in a thundercloud is extremely hot”),¹² time (“Contact and so on with water in a well and so forth is perceived very differently in summer, winter etc.”),¹³ condition (“a deviant behavior of potentialities is observed even for external [things] such as seeds and plants etc., because of different conditions”).¹⁴ The criticism proceeds considering another typical element of an inference, the cause-effect relationship. Also in this case a proper inference can hardly be drawn because “the capacity of fire to produce a modification of wood and similar substances, that very capacity is stopped in case of substances such as a heap of clouds etc.”¹⁵ The cause-effect relationship is thus rarely permanent, for “the powers of substances whose efficacy is observed in a thing are difficult to ascertain in other things”.¹⁶ Then follows what is possibly Bhartṛhari’s most famous remark on the point; differently from the previous ones it does not focus on inference itself, but rather on the person who makes it: “One thing, even if inferred with effort by clever thinkers, is established in another way by cleverer ones”.¹⁷ Finally he rounds the question off by exploiting a similitude: “Similarly to a blind man groping his way across a rugged path, it is by no means difficult to fall if inference is the primary

⁹ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.30: *adr̥ṣṭānām ca karmāṇām phalanyame svabhāvasaṃvid āgamapratibaddhā.*

¹⁰ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.30: *ko hy anavasthitasādharmyavaidharmyeṣu nityam alabdhanīścayeṣu puruṣatarkeṣu viśvāsaḥ.*

¹¹ VP 1.32: *avasthādeśakālānām bhedād bhinnāsu śaktiṣu |
bhāvānām anumānena prasiddhir atidurlabhā ||*

¹² *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32: *atīṣito haimavatīnām apām sparśaḥ. saḥ tu balāhakāgnikuṇḍādiṣu tadrūpāṇām evātyuṣṇa upalabhyate.*

¹³ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32: *gr̥ṣmāhemantādiṣu kūpajalādīnām atyantabhinnāḥ sparśādayaḥ dr̥ṣyante.*

¹⁴ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32: *bāhyānām api bijauśadhiprabhṛtīnām avasthābedhād upalabhyate śaktivyabhicaraḥ.*

¹⁵ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.33: *agnyādīnām kāṣṭhādivikārotpādane dr̥ṣṭasāmārthyānām abhrapaṭalādiṣu dravyeṣu tathāvidham sāmārthyam pratibadhyate.*

¹⁶ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.33: *tatraikasmin viṣaye dr̥ṣṭasāmārthyānām punar viṣayāntareṣu dravyānām duravasānāḥ śaktayaḥ.*

¹⁷ VP 1.34: *yatnenānumito 'py arthaḥ kuśalair anumātr̥bhīḥ |
abhiyuktatarair anyair anyathaivopapadyate ||*

[means of knowledge]”.¹⁸ Now, if Bhartrhari deems inference unreliable, how can one get a valid piece of knowledge? In the end, is valid knowledge possible at all? One may try to find an answer by drawing on the clues scattered throughout the section considered so far.

A first thing to point out is that Bhartrhari accepts the existence of a special kind of knowledge which is typical of non-ordinary beings; these beings are characterized by having an intellect free from impurities and a vision similar to that of the Vedic Seers. Their cognitive capacities lie well beyond the domain of logical reason: their knowledge is not erroneous and has the same vividness of perception.¹⁹ Still, this kind of knowledge is by no means spontaneous or taken for granted: “It is affirmed that the visionary (*ārṣam*) knowledge of the Seers is manifested once their selves have been purified, through the merit [which derives] from traditional knowledge only”.²⁰ Despite the acknowledgment of the existence of extraordinary beings, their special powers are not regarded as innate, but rather seen as the results of and restrained by the authority of traditional knowledge.

The term I render here with ‘traditional knowledge’ is *āgama*. A. Aklujkar (Aklujkar 1989b, 17) has shown that in the VP this word can assume three basic connotations. It may mean:

- An inherited lore which is acquired by being born in a specific community.
- A traditional mass of knowledge which is preserved in authoritative texts.
- The Vedic revelation, embracing both the *Śruti* and the *Smṛti*.

I believe that a further connotation can be added to the above scheme. In order to describe it I will refer to three different discussions contained in the stanzas under scrutiny.

First, let us go back to the way Bhartrhari conceives the cognitive process of the seers. This process seems to move between two extremes: on the one hand, the seers’ cognitions are instantaneous and immediate; on the other hand, they are not regarded as a light in the darkness, for

¹⁸ VP 1.42: *hastasparsād ivāndhena viṣame pathi dhāvātā | anumānapradhānena vinipāto na durlabhaḥ ||*

¹⁹ VP 1.37: *āvīrbhūtaprakāśānām anupaplutacetāsām | atītānāgatajñānaṃ pratyakṣān na viśisyate ||*

“The knowledge of the past and future of those whose minds are not afflicted, and whose insights are manifested, is not different from perception”.

VP 1.38: *atīndriyān asaṃvedyān paśyanty ārṣeṇa cakṣuṣā | ye bhāvān vacanaṃ teṣāṃ nānumānena bādhyate||*

“The word of those who, with the vision of the Seer, see what is not perceivable and is beyond the senses is not invalidated by inference”.

²⁰ Vṛtti on VP 1.30: *tad arthajñānaṃ ārṣaṃ ṛṣīnām āgamikenaiva dharmeṇa saṃskṛtātmanām āvirbhavatīty ākhyāyate*. In his commentary on the first chapter of the VP named *Sphuṭākṣarā*, Vṛṣabhadeva interprets the apparently redundant word *ārṣam* as indicating ‘a special kind of knowledge’: *ārṣam iti jñānaviśeṣasya saṃjñā*.

they heavily rely on a mass of traditional knowledge whereby they are underpinned, nourished and eventually made possible. I think that the same paradigm informs the cognitive process of ordinary people, too. In their case a cognition is an act of instantaneous awareness which is achieved through a body of notions the knower acquires in many ways in the course of life and even beyond. This is why an act of cognition cannot simply be regarded as a form of perception, inference and so on: each *pramāṇa* is always tinted by the others, and all together, simultaneously, contribute to the realization of a valid piece of knowledge (*pramiti*). Obviously, in each and every case, a single *pramāṇa* might be predominant but it never works in isolation. Bhartṛhari describes such an approach in VP 1.35 where the action of knowing is compared to the cognitive process of the experts of jewelry, who are capable of identifying the genuineness of a precious stone. This ability is not (only) a matter of inference. He says: “The knowledge of the experts of precious stones, coins and so forth is not inferential. It derives from practice (*abhyāsa*) and is incommunicable to others”. It is worth noting the stress on the non-inferential nature of this *pramiti*, which in order to be an inference should be objective and communicable to others (in technical terms a *parārthānumāna*), and that is not the case. Furthermore, this knowledge has another crucial connotation: it derives from practice. And practice is somehow once again connected to the key concept of traditional knowledge (especially if one keeps in mind that the word *abhyāsa* expresses not only the ideas of “repetition, exercise”, but also those of “use, custom”). In other words, the expert of stones manages to recognize the goodness of a jewel instantaneously, but this *pramiti* is only the final result of a longer process in which many ways of acquiring knowledge are involved.²¹ All of them can be classified under the umbrella term of ‘practice’ or ‘traditional knowledge’ (*āgama*).

The second point concerns the meaning of *āgama* in the stanzas in question with their corresponding *Vṛtti*.²² The section employs the expression nine times. Most occurrences (7 out of 9) come within the first three *kārikās* (VP 1.30, 1.31, 1.32), the remaining ones towards the end of the

²¹ Consider how similar to Bhartṛhari’s is Abhinavagupta’s conception:

*ratnatattvam avidvān prāñ niścayopāyacarcanāt/
anupāyāvikalpāptaū ratnajña it bhanyate// Tantrāloka 1.229.*

“It is called a connoisseur of jewels somebody who, without knowing before the real essence of a stone, through a series of means and determinations acquires a knowledge of that [essence] which is eventually devoid of means and conceptual representations”.

²² The use of the same word to indicate slightly different concepts is not limited to *āgama*; other crucial terms in Bhartṛhari’s theory have some degree of ambiguity. For instance, A. Aklujkar noticed it for *pratibhā* and *śabdatattva* (Aklujkar 1970, 11-12).

section (VP 1.42). The first four occurrences are clearly related to the typical meaning of the term. *Āgama* means lore; it is that which has been handed down to us from immemorial time, and hence it is used here as a plain synonym of the Veda.²³ The argument developed in these first stanzas is based on the idea that in order to understand *dharma* one cannot rely on logical reasoning, but has to trust the traditional teachings embodied in the Vedic corpus: after all, even the seers are bounded to the *Śruti*. On the contrary, the two occurrences in the *Vṛtti* on VP 1. 32 show a slightly different connotation. The context is different: the stanza is devoted to criticizing inference by showing that an invariable concomitance between two objects is almost always disrupted by a mutation of condition, space and time of the objects under discussion. Concerning this, the *Vṛtti* affirms that an ordinary man is unable to know something which is inherently difficult to perceive without the help of *āgama*.²⁴ In this case *āgama* does not seem to refer to any of the senses pointed out by Aklujkar but rather to some other way of acquiring knowledge.

The third and final point regards VP 1.31 which, although explicitly it treats dharmic matters, seems to hint at a type of knowledge that is informed by the Vedic teaching but that is not totally identical with it. This kind of knowledge is not defined in detail but its presence is suggested by the existence of ‘ways of understanding what is good for humans which are universal and well-known’.²⁵ To act without taking them into proper account conflicts with ordinary usage. Such ways of understanding are never set aside by logical reasoning.²⁶ As remarked by the *Vṛtti*, these ‘ways of understanding’, which are evidently based on tradition, can be strong enough to cast aside some interpretations of the Vedic text. The point is not explicit but in the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.31 Bhartrhari contends that wrong interpretations of the Veda are possible, and he seems to imply that only such ‘ways of understanding’ can keep them at bay: “Some people, just by resorting at will to the teachings

²³ Aklujkar has thoroughly discussed the meaning of Vedic revelation in Bhartrhari’s thought in Aklujkar 2009.

²⁴ See *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32: *tatra sūkṣmam avasthānaviśeṣaṃ prākṛtam aprākṛtagamyam āgamacakṣurantareṇāpratyakṣam anumānamātreṇānīcitam kaḥ sādhayitum asaṅgamudhaḥ prayatate.*

“Which wise man would make an effort to establish that peculiarity of condition which is innate, which in such an original state is not knowable, which is not perceivable without the eye of tradition, and not determinable through inference alone?”.

Vṛṣabhadeva explains the expression *aprākṛtagamyam* as *pratyakṣadharmabhir gamyam*. That is to say that the subtle condition is knowable only when its properties are manifested, e.g. when it has abandoned its contracted form thanks to the activity of time.

²⁵ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.31: *santi sādharāṇāḥ prasiddhāḥ puruṣahitapratipattimargāḥ.*

²⁶ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.31: *yeṣv anyathā pravṛttir lokavirasā, na ca tarkeṇa kādadici api vyudastapūrvāḥ.*

of Tradition, display a behavior which is reproachable and in opposition with the one [accepted] in the world”.²⁷ The idea is that even what is stated in the Vedic text must comply with a set of values which is shared by the members of the Brahmanical society (“accepted in the world”) and deemed fundamental to its correct functioning. Such standards of conduct are clearly drawn from the Vedic lore but they are eventually sanctioned by a group of individuals (*śiṣṭas*) whose interpretations are regarded as authoritative.²⁸ The presence of these ‘ways of understanding’ seems thus to allude to a kind of knowledge which everybody shares, which seems to include common sense but that is not restricted to that. This knowledge, being eventually ‘social’, cannot be but linguistic.²⁹

What can we gather from these three examples? I think Bhartṛhari is using *āgama* to indicate a further way of gaining knowledge having the following characteristics:

- it is a kind of knowledge in which *abhyāsa* – exercise, custom or simply experience – plays a role; it can be communicated to others but not in every case.
- it is a kind of knowledge which differs from *anumāna*.
- it is a kind of knowledge which not always coincides with the Vedic scripture.

Āgama certainly embraces the three senses already specified by Aklujkar, being related to the inherited lore, to the culture acquired in the social dimension, to the teaching of a religious tradition. Yet, I think there is actually something more: in the end, *āgama* seems to indicate a kind of multifaceted knowledge that is not exclusively based on the perceptual and logical skills of the knower, but that differs also, and this is crucial, from ‘pure’ verbal testimony. Such a kind of knowledge is language-based and seems to be at the very core of any cognition. Are we forced on this basis to challenge the scholarly agreement on Bhartṛhari’s conventional acceptance of just three *pramāṇas*? I do not believe so. As far as I can see, by using *āgama* Bhartṛhari is not adding a further *pramāṇa*, he is rather expanding the epistemological significance of *śabda* by going beyond its connotation as ‘verbal testimony’.

Thus, to sum up, Bhartṛhari seems to conceive the cognitive act as a multifaceted process based on different means of acquiring knowledge: some of those are founded on reasoning only (such as

²⁷ *Vṛtti* on VP 1.31: *kāmam āgamoddeśānīśrayenaiva kecid vininditam api lokasamācāraviruddhācaraṇam pratipadyante.*

²⁸ The role of the *śiṣṭas* in the VP is discussed in Deshpande 1993, Aklujkar 2004, Ferrante forth.

²⁹ For a comparable, but non-Indian, perspective on the link between linguistic communication as a means of knowledge and society, see Lauri’s contribution to this volume.

inference), some on traditional lore, some lie somewhere between the two. None of them is applied in isolation and, most importantly, all are linguistically informed.³⁰

2. On the validity of inferential reasoning outside the dharmic sphere

Let us now go back to the problem I touched upon before, and clarify why Bhartrhari's criticism of reasoning (*tarka*) is not to be limited to dharmic matters only. As far as the 'non-worldly' (*alaukika*) sphere is concerned – a sphere that broadly speaking includes ethic and metaphysical judgments – there is no doubt that *āgama* prevails over any other *pramāṇas*. Yet, as we have seen in the texts quoted above, Bhartrhari recommends that *anumāna* should be handled with care also in ordinary situations. Much of the problem in accepting this conclusion lies in the ambiguity of the term *āgama*. When Bhartrhari maintains that in ordinary transactions logical reasoning is subsidiary to *āgama* I claim that he is not necessarily referring to the Veda or to some form of 'verbal or traditional authority', but he is indeed alluding to that kind of multifaceted epistemological process I tried to outline above.

Let us check whether the texts support this interpretation. The idea whereby the criticism of reasoning is narrowed down to the *alaukika* sphere heavily draws on the first stanzas under analysis (VP 1.30 and VP 1.31, together with the corresponding *Vṛtti*), which explicitly mention *dharma*. Since they come first in a cluster largely devoted to epistemological questions it is tempting to conclude that all the ensuing considerations on the validity of *tarka* are limited to the *alaukika* sphere. But is it really the case? First, *dharma* is actually mentioned only in the first two *kārikās*, with no occurrence either in the stanzas or in the *Vṛtti* after VP 1.31. The absence is even more significant if one considers the three stanzas in which the criticism of inference is fully carried out (1.32, 1.33, 1.34). Second, a careful look at these three stanzas reveals that all the examples given in the *Vṛtti* to illustrate why *anumāna* is unreliable discuss ordinary cases: Bhartrhari is not at all concerned with the sphere of *dharma* (the list given in fn. 15, from VP 1.7, remains a good example), but he rather refers to ordinary cognitions such as the perception of cold and warm things (VP 1.32) or the capacity of fire to burn (VP 1.33). Third, and most importantly, there are passages in the *Vṛtti* which question the validity of *anumāna* also in the case of ordinary cognitions. The first relevant one belongs to the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.32:

³⁰ J. Bronkhorst has claimed that Bhartrhari believed that a particular class of cognitions, namely the insights leading to the knowledge of the highest reality (Brahman), are not linguistically informed (Bronkhorst 1995). I have discussed this position in Ferrante 2014.

ihāvyabharitābhīmatasāhacaryasya dr̥ṣṭasya sambandhināḥ tatsadr̥śasya vā darśanād adr̥ṣṭe sambandhini yaj jñānaṃ utpadyate tenāpratyakṣasyārthasya prasiddhir duravasanā. tathā hi avasthāntareṣu viniścītabalasattvādīnām puruṣagamyēṣu apuruṣagamyēṣu vā dr̥śyante svabhāvā vyabharinaḥ.

‘When the inferred object is not visible, it is really difficult to know [that] non-perceived object through a cognition arising from the perception of a visible one, either connected with or similar to the former, and whose concomitance has been conceived as non-deviant. For example, it is observed that the proper natures of entities, the capacity of which have been established [under certain circumstances], change under others, either accessible to human knowledge or not.’

Here Bhartṛhari is explaining that inferential knowledge is unstable because, as remarked above, the conditions characterizing it in a particular instance will never be exactly the same in another. In this regard, the last sentence is the most relevant to us: “the proper natures of entities etc., the validity of which have been established under certain circumstances, change under others, either accessible to human knowledge or not”. The point is to understand the import of the last expression: “accessible to human knowledge or not” (*puruṣagamyēṣu/apuruṣagamyēṣu*). The translation above somehow follows the gloss given in Vṛṣabhadeva’s *Sphuṭākṣarā* where it is clearly affirmed that *puruṣagamyēṣu/ apuruṣagamyēṣu* stands for “accessible/inaccessible to perception” (*pratyakṣeṣu/apratyakṣeṣu*).³¹ If that is true – and there is no reason to reject Vṛṣabhadeva’s reading – one must conclude that *anumāna* is not totally reliable also when it is about things accessible to perception.

Furthermore, in the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.42, Bhartṛhari explicitly says that inference is always rickety, no matter whether it concerns *prameyas* accessible to perception (which frequently happens with ordinary cognitions) or not (which always happens with cognitions concerning dharmic matters or, using the VP’s phrasing, “actions the purposes of which are invisible”).

yasya hi sthālīpulākanyāyenaikadeśaṃ dr̥ṣṭvā śiṣṭe ‘rthe pratipattiḥ so ‘ndha iva viṣame girimarge cakṣuṣmantāṃ netāram antareṇa tvarayā parīpatan kaṃcid eva mārgaikadeśaṃ hastasparśenāvagamya samatīkrāntas tatpratyayād aparam api tathāiva pratīpadyamano yathā vināśaṃ labhate, tadvad āgamacakṣuṣā vinā tārkanūpatī kevelenānumānena kvacid āhitapratyayo dr̥ṣṭādr̥ṣṭaphaleṣu karmasv āgamam utkramya pravartamano niyataṃ mahatā pratyavāyena saṃyujyate.

³¹ See VP p. 89, l. 8-9.

‘Somebody who — on the basis of the maxim of the rice in the pot —³² having seen a part [pretends to] know the rest (*śiste ‘rthe*), is like a blind man who, without a guide endowed with sight, proceeds fast on a rugged mountain path. He goes on, having discerned one part of the track by the touch of the hand, and by knowing it (*tatpratyayād*), he believes that another part is like [the former], thus ruining himself (*vināśam labhate*). In the same way, somebody who follows reason without the ‘eye’ of the tradition, whose knowledge of things is based on inferential thought only, who acts passing over traditional knowledge concerning actions having both visible and invisible purposes, that somebody is necessarily bound to great disaster (*niyataṃ mahatā pratyavāyena saṃyujyate*).’

A final, collateral point seems to corroborate this interpretation. Often the Pratyabhijñā school ends up being a lucid interpreter of Bhartrhari’s thought. Concerning this point R. Torella (Torella 2013) has convincingly shown that the Pratyabhijñā philosophers developed the idea of *prasiddhi* (a critical term in the epistemology of the school indicating a background knowledge common to every human being) drawing on Bhartrhari’s tenets of *pratibhā* and *āgama*. Incidentally, this seems to confirm that the latter term has a significance that is not limited to the realm of *dharma*.³³

This interpretation of *āgama* as indicating a particular, multifaceted type of knowledge, instead of mere ‘sacred tradition’, has a clear advantage: it allows us to account for Bhartrhari’s affirmations on the superiority of tradition over other *pramāṇas*, without regarding him as an enemy of human rationality.

That said, although Bhartrhari’s defense of *āgama* can be fully justified on purely epistemological grounds, this does not exclude that it can also be connected to his historical context and intellectual agenda.³⁴ There is little doubt that one of the main goals of the VP is to revive the pāṇinian school of grammar, whose prestige had been progressively waning after the period of the *munitraya* (Pāṇini, Kātyāyana, Patañjali) and the very existence of which was supposedly jeopardized by a deeply

³² The maxim affirms that one should not check all the grains in a pot to determine whether the rice is cooked or not, one grain is enough. According to Bhartrhari, the principle—indeed a typical case of induction—is epistemologically unreliable.

³³ It is worth noting that in his *Īśvaraṃpratyabhijñāvimarśinī* Abhinavagupta explicitly confirms the idea that for Bhartrhari *āgama* (and obviously *pratyakṣa* too) is more reliable than inference: *pratyakṣāgamau bādhakau anumānasya iti tatrabhavad-bhartrharinyāyabhāṣyakṛtprabhṛtayaḥ* (‘According to the venerable Bhartrhari, to the author of the *Nyāyābhāṣya* and to others, both *āgama* and direct perception invalidate inference’). See *ĪPV* on 2.3.1-2. Iyer-Pandey edition: 89-90.

³⁴ Todeschini had the merit to draw attention to the VP’s apologetic side, a topic that so far has unfortunately received very little attention. Yet, in this particular case, I am not convinced that Bhartrhari’s aim ‘is [to secure] his own tradition from possible criticism leveled through reason’ [...] ‘by securing the words and the perceptions of *śiṣṭas/āptas* from inference’ (Todeschini 2010, 103).

changed socio-religious context.³⁵ Much of the innovations of the VP, such as the stress on questions which are hardly discussed in the works of the previous *vaiyākaraṇas*, are probably rooted in the new historical environment, where several intellectual movements, both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical, were competing for their own affirmation (and probably for patronage, too). Hence, it does not seem out of place to suppose that Bhartṛhari followed the trend going on in his days. Indeed, upon a closer examination, the first part of the first chapter of the VP (from the beginning to 1.43) is entirely dedicated to giving a theoretical foundation to the science of grammar, a foundation that in the ‘new world’ cannot be limited anymore to the old five ‘purposes’ put forth by Patañjali at the beginning of his *Mahābhāṣya* (*rakṣa*, *ūha*, *āgama*, *laghu*, *asaṃdeha*, namely protection of the Vedic text, adaptation of the Vedic mantras to the rituals, complying with the Vedic tradition, economy of expression, removal of doubt). The strategy Bhartṛhari implemented was deeply connected with the intellectual setting he lived in. In order to be effective, and possibly in order to appeal to a potential audience, any intellectual proposal should have a soteriological drive and should be able to say something about ‘spiritual’ questions. Bhartṛhari addressed the problem by elaborating on the causal link, established by his predecessors, between the grammatical science and the knowledge of the Veda. But he went further by adding another step: drawing on proto-Vedāntic ideas (the historical contours of which are obscure but which were probably lively at his time)³⁶ he gives to the Veda–Language–Grammar relation an ontological status, by identifying the sacred text with the metaphysical principle that permeates all aspects of reality, Brahman. Once the pervasiveness of language is accepted, it must be maintained at every level of analysis, otherwise the grounds on which the authority of grammar is built would crumble. Epistemology is no exception and the criticism of inference must be understood within the picture that has emerged so far. Having in mind the authoritativeness of grammar as the final goal, Bhartṛhari thus defends the idea that every cognition is linguistically determined and that all cognitions are conceptual representations (in technical jargon *savikalpakajñāna*). If it is relatively easy to maintain, in the given cultural context, that dharmic questions can be addressed only via *āgama-śabda*-Veda, it is certainly harder to establish it for ordinary cognitions, for which perception and inference seem to be reliable ways of gaining knowledge. A possible solution is to conjecture that Bhartṛhari developed his multifaceted way to conceive ordinary knowledge (which, it is useful to repeat it, is permeated by *savikalpaka*

³⁵ See Bhartṛhari’s account of the history of *vyākaraṇa* contained in VP 2. 481-2.487. In particular, VP 2. 485 deals with the decay of grammar after Patañjali.

³⁶ The most reliable studies on the early history of Vedānta remain those by H. Nakamura (Nakamura 1983 and Nakamura 2004). On Bhartṛhari as a *vedāntin* thinker, see Nakamura 2004, 457 ff. and Ferrante 2015.

cognitions such as verbal testimony, memory, inherited lore, religious scriptures, common notions etc.) precisely in order to overcome this difficulty. But the inevitable consequence of this strategy is the demotion of inference to a *pramāṇa* unable to produce correct knowledge *independently* from other factors.

3. Bhartrhari's approach to verbal testimony

Given these premises, one may conjecture which position Bhartrhari would take in the philosophical debate on the role of verbal testimony. Following the path paved by E. Freschi in her introductory essay, one may wonder in which category Bhartrhari's ideas on testimony fall. Does he regard verbal testimony as an independent means of knowledge (thus being an anti-reductionist) or not (hence a reductionist)? If the former is the case, where would the authority of language come from? Would it come from language itself (as argued by Mīmāṃsakas) or from some other source external to language itself (simply put, the position of Naiyāyikas)? As it will be clear below the answer is not as straightforward as it seems.

First, one can doubt the validity of the questions, and with reason: as remarked above, Bhartrhari is explicit in denying any differentiation between *pramāṇas* and seems to endorse an integrated view of the act of knowledge. Notwithstanding this, it seems to me that such questions remain legitimate. After all, the core element of a verbal testimony consists of its being 'verbal', hence 'linguistic'.³⁷ I think that in order to better appreciate Bhartrhari's position one has to keep in mind that he seems to adopt the perspective of the two different points of view:³⁸ the one of ordinary reality, which in the VP is often indicated with the term *vyāvahārika*, and the one of true reality, which we may call for the sake of convenience *pāramārthika*, even if the term is rarely used in the VP (Ferrante 2015, 78). This approach is not unusual in the scholastic phase of Indian thought, but actually not that common if we limit our considerations to the Brahmanical milieu up to the 5th c. CE. Probably the idea occurred for the first time within Buddhist Mādhyamika circles and was systematically adopted by Brahmanical thinkers only much later.³⁹ By analyzing the issue of 'verbal testimony' from Bhartrhari's *vyāvahārika* standpoint one may be let down. As I noted above,

³⁷ In Indian philosophical jargon the word most commonly employed to indicate verbal testimony is *śabda*, simply language. In the VP the term is evidently crucial, still it is rarely used with the epistemological connotation so frequent elsewhere.

³⁸ Actually, perhaps even more (Aklujkar 2002, 217-218).

³⁹ The oldest occurrence of the concept seems to be found in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* 24.10, roughly 2nd c. CE. In Brahmanical philosophy the earliest systematic use of the two degrees of reality is that of Advaita Vedānta (approximately from 8th c. CE onwards).

Bhartṛhari does not indulge in analyzing epistemological questions. Moreover, there are no clues to understand which position he would assume in the debate on testimony, even if the discussion was presumably going on among his contemporaries. Such an attitude might have two reasons. On the one hand, Bhartṛhari acknowledges that the description of the process of knowledge elaborated by fellow Brahmanical thinkers (such as Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas) is totally acceptable as far as ordinary reality is concerned, and hence there is no need to expand it or to discuss it thoroughly. But, on the other hand, this lack of discussion can be read as a sign that the epistemology of *pramāṇas* is ultimately not so crucial for Bhartṛhari's purposes. I suspect that this attitude is related to the acceptance of various levels of reality. By adopting this approach, the analysis of the lower level, no matter how conceived, is never performed to provide a picture of how things really are, since it will be sooner or later superseded by a higher, more refined, explanation. The analysis of the lower degree is thus always carried out for explicative purposes (and also because, one may fancy, if there were no lower reality there would not be anything to discuss at all). This sometimes causes a sense of bewilderment in the interpreter. When one is expecting from a text a thorough analysis of a certain question the actual discussion often ends up being minimal. In other cases, the opposite happens. In a sense there is always a rationale: the most debated aspects of lower reality are usually the ones who are deemed crucial for obtaining the higher one.⁴⁰ Bhartṛhari might be one of these cases. Even if his ontology does not presuppose that ordinary phenomena are unreal, he nonetheless grants Brahman, the highest reality, more ontological vividness. This might imply that every question belonging to the lower realm can be ignored because eventually it becomes irrelevant. Still, there are problems, which can be easily dismissed as unimportant from the highest perspective, which are minutely discussed from the *vyāvahārika* perspective. The VP offers a gigantic example of this stance. In accordance with the principle that the whole is more real than the parts, Bhartṛhari maintains that the sentence and its meaning are indivisible units and constitute the basis of linguistic communication. On that point his final position is that the meaning of a sentence is not understood by simply putting together the meanings of the individual words. Yet, it is a matter of fact that most of the VP is dedicated to the analysis of units smaller than the sentence, thus devoted to something that is, from the *pāramārthika* perspective, non-existent. Why? Simply because Bhartṛhari is a grammarian and he has to adopt this stance for practical reasons. As nicely put by S. Iyer: "To agree that the indivisible sentence has to be divided for practical purposes is a kind of climb down for the grammarian but he has to do it because he cannot perform his task unless the sentence is analyzed". (Iyer 1969, 220). In VP 2.233 Bhartṛhari is

⁴⁰ The argument is typically used, for instance, in the case of the philosophy of Dharmakīrti (Dunne 2004, 65).

much more explicit than Iyer: “In scientific treatises, that which is described through the distinction of grammatical categories is nescience”.⁴¹ Evidently, questions such as the epistemological ones do not raise the same interest in the grammarian and thus remain in the dark, reaching their full sense only in the higher perspective. Within this higher perspective the role of language is amplified to the extent that it becomes the underlying logical structure of reality (in the VP’s jargon *paśyantī vāc* or *parapaśyantī vāc*).⁴² If one puts oneself in this perspective, language is everything and molds everything. By endorsing this view, and therefore by endorsing the process of knowledge implied in it, a discussion on testimony becomes possible and Bhartrhari can be considered an anti-reductionist thinker claiming that the authoritativeness of language lies in language itself. But, in a sense, he would be even more than that: if in the end all cognitive processes are to be reduced to language, and if language is the core trait of verbal testimony, then it would not be out of place to regard Bhartrhari as a hyper-antireductionist; at least, as far as the *pāramārthika* dimension is concerned.

Acknowledgments

I am thankful to Elisa Freschi for having invited me to contribute to this volume as well as for having constantly urged me to spell my views out as clearly as I could. If this paper has achieved some sort of clarity it is mostly due to her efforts. Needless to say, I remain the only person responsible for any inaccuracies.

My gratitude goes also to Katharine Apostle for having improved the English of the original draft.

The research for this article has generously been supported by the Austrian Science Funds and it has been conducted within the framework of the project ‘Language and Action in Early Brahmanical Philosophy’ (P 25287).

⁴¹ VP 2.233a: *śāstreṣu prakriyābhedair avidyopavarnyate*.

⁴² In VP 1.159 Bhartrhari holds that language is manifested in three forms: the audible and articulated language (*vaikhārī vāc*), the mental, inaudible one (*madhyamā vāc*), the unitary and inner one in which every kind of differentiation is lost (*paśyantī vāc*). Some scholars have argued that Bhartrhari envisioned a fourth stage, often called *parā paśyantī*, corresponding to pure consciousness (*cit*). Aklujkar has hinted at the possibility (Aklujkar 1970, 77-81), but nonetheless stressed that the *parā paśyantī* level should be regarded as a further articulation of *paśyantī* or, simplifying, a different way to look at *paśyantī*. M. Biardeau (Biardeau 1964, 6) tried to trace the presence of *parā paśyantī* also in VP 1.14, without, in my opinion, much success.

Appendix: The VP stanzas from 1.30 to 1.43

VP 1.30 na cāgamād ṛte dharmas tarkeṇa vyavatiṣṭhate/
ṛṣiṇām api yaj jñānaṃ tad apy āgamapūrvakam//

VP 1.31 dharmasya cāvyavacchinnāḥ panthāno ye vyavasthitāḥ /
na tāṃl lokaprasiddhatvāt kaścit tarkeṇa bādhyate//

VP 1.32 avasthādeśakālāṇām bhedād bhinnāsu śaktiṣu /
bhāvānām anumānena prasiddhir atidurlabhā //

VP 1.33 nirjñātaśakter dravyasya tāṃ tām arthakriyām prati /
viśiṣṭadravyasaṃbandhe sā śaktiḥ pratibadhyate//

VP 1.34 yatnenānumito 'py arthaḥ kuśalair anumātr̥bhiḥ /
abhiyuktatarair anyair anyathaivopapādyate //

VP 1.35 pareṣām asamākhyeyam abhyāsād eva jāyate /
maṇirūpyādivijñānaṃ tadvidāṃ nānumānikam //

VP 1.36 pratyakṣam anumānaṃ ca vyatikramya vyavasthitāḥ /
pitṛrakṣaḥpiśācānām karmajā eva siddhayaḥ //

VP 1.37 āvirbhūtaprakāśānām anupaplutacetasām /
atītānāgatajñānaṃ pratyakṣān na viśiṣyate //

VP 1.38 atīndriyān asaṃvedyān paśyanty ārṣeṇa cakṣuṣā /
ye bhāvān vacanaṃ teṣāṃ nānumānena bādhyate //

VP 1.39 yo yasya svam iva jñānaṃ darśanaṃ nātīśāṅkate /
sthitaṃ pratyakṣapakṣe taṃ katham anyo nivartayet //

VP 1.40 idaṃ puṇyam idaṃ pāpam ity etasmin padadvaye /
ācaṇḍālamanusyāṇām alpam śāstraprayojanam //

VP 1.41 caitanyam iva yaś cāyam avicchadena vartate /
āgamas tam upāsīno hetuvādair na bādhyate //

VP 1.42 hastasparśād ivāndhena viṣame pathi dhāvātā /
anumānapradhānena vinipāto na durlabhaḥ //

VP 1.43 tasmād akṛtakam śāstram smṛtiṃ ca sanibandhanām /
āśṛityārabhyate śiṣṭaiḥ sādhutvaviṣayā smṛtiḥ //

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