

On *ṛṣis* and *yogins*: Immediate and Mediate Extraordinary Cognitions in Early Brahmanical Thought

Marco Ferrante

Austrian Academy of Sciences – Vienna

Introduction

The notion that humans – or at least humans endowed with special abilities – are capable of having extraordinary cognitions seems to be an unwavering trait of the culture of ancient India. On philosophical grounds, most schools¹ accepted the idea, even if with different degrees of emphasis. From the 6th c. CE onwards, the topic became a thorny issue and a heated point of contention between Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina traditions. This ‘classical’ phase, quite possibly initiated by Dignāga’s (5th/6th c. CE) affirmation of the epistemological validity of supra-sensory insights,² is characterized by a strong criticism of such a claim by Mīmāṃsaka authors³ – chiefly Kumārila (7th c. CE), Maṇḍana Miśra (8th c. CE) and Vācaspati Miśra (10th c. CE) – and followed in turn by a Buddhist retort, noticeable in the works of Dharmakīrti (7th c. CE), Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, (8th c. CE) and others, with the purpose of defending the epistemological reliability of the Buddha. In the last years this phase has gained considerable attention, and the intricacies of the arguments introduced by the two sides have thoroughly been investigated.⁴ Some scholars emphasize the soteriological implications of the discussion, by showing how it eventually amounts to establishing whether the access to the knowledge of the ultimate reality must be mediated by the teachings of a revealed tradition or not.⁵ These studies often seem to implicitly polarize between a Brahmanical side advocating the necessity of a scriptural medium in order to attain the knowledge of the ultimate truth and a Buddhist/Jaina side favoring the possibility of independent access to this truth. The point here is not to question the accuracy of such an interpretation, but rather to avoid the risk of oversimplifying a problem that has complex contours. Actually, if one looks at the phase that precedes the classical one it is not unusual to find an explicit defense of extraordinary knowledge in Brahmanical texts as well as its criticism in Buddhist ones.⁶ Moreover, to further complicate the picture, in a later period the notion of extraordinary cognitions was taken to extremes and it explicitly referred to instances of all-embracing knowledge, in short omniscience. The purpose of this paper is to offer a preliminary survey of the pre-classical phase with reference to the Brahmanical speculation.

¹ There are two exceptions: the materialistic school of the Cārvākas and, much more historically influential, the Mīmāṃsā, the school of Vedic exegesis.

² The ‘perception of the *yogin*’ (*yogipratyakṣa*) is defined by Dignāga in *Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1.5cd as *yoginām gurunirdeśāvyatibhinnāramātrāḍḥk*. «The vision of the object in itself, totally unmingled with the teaching of the master, is [the perception] of yogins». The remark *gurunirdeśāvyatibhinna*, «totally unmingled with the teaching of the master» is a clear indication that *yogipratyakṣa* is not linked to any conceptual knowledge and is purely intuitive.

³ There is a relative abundance of studies on (Bhāṭṭa)Mīmāṃsā’s refutation of extraordinary knowledge. See, for example, Kataoka 2011, McCrea 2009, Taber 2009.

⁴ For instance, Dunne 2006, Eltschinger 2009 and 2014, MacDonald 2009, McClintock 2000 and 2010, Pemwieser 1991, Torella 2012, Woo 2005, 2007 and 2009.

⁵ See, for instance, Torella 2012: 477. For a different opinion on the same point see Eltschinger 2014.

⁶ There are passages in the Pāli canon in which the Buddha himself negates the possibility of omniscience, the most explicit being in the *Kaṇṇakathala Sutta* where it is maintained that: “there is no recluse or brahman who knows all, who sees all, simultaneously; that is not possible”. See McClintock 2010: 28-29. On this point see also Jaini 1974: 80-82.

The theme is vast, largely unstudied and certainly will not be exhausted here. Nevertheless, I believe that such an investigation is necessary, at least for putting the breach between Mīmāṃsā and the Buddhists, which has hitherto dominated much of the scholarly discussion, in a broader picture.

The case study of this essay is the observation that from a certain period onwards (roughly from the 5th c. CE, when the Brahmanical schools of philosophy were progressively systematized and commentarial literature started to thrive) some schools of Indian philosophy⁷ began to contrast two quite different kinds of intentional supra-sensory insights. Both were considered able to lead to knowledge of the ultimate things but whereas one is a typical instance of an intuitional, pure and immediate cognition, the other is mediate and based on the cultivation of specific psychophysical practices. Interestingly enough, these two ways of intentional extraordinary capabilities were embodied by two figures who are rather typical, to some extent even stereotypical, of the cultural/religious setting of classical India: immediate cognition is generally associated with the *ṛṣi*, the Vedic seer, while mediate one is associated with the *yogin*, the practitioner of Yoga.

With the aim of understanding whether this 5th c. CE dichotomy is based on previous literature or whether it is a kind of innovation, I will briefly reconstruct the literary and philosophical history of both figures by investigating the relevant sources. As an example of the 5th c. CE discussion I will refer to what the grammarian Bhartṛhari (460-510 CE)⁸ says concerning our problem. Finally, I will attempt a vague chronology of the way Brahmanism dealt with extraordinary cognitions up to the 5th c. CE.

1. Extraordinary cognitions and omniscience: a definition

Before proceeding, I think a clarification of the terms at issue is useful. An ‘extraordinary cognition’ can be minimally defined as a reliable cognition⁹ (*pramā*) of an object (*prameya*) that is carried out either by eluding the ordinary means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) or by extending their range.¹⁰ Although the number and the functions of these means of knowledge are a matter of philosophical debate, all of them are characterized by dealing with objects that are, or have been, in contact with the sensorial apparatus. An extraordinary cognition is typically the opposite. In it ordinary senses have no role and its object is defined as, literally, «being beyond the senses» (*atīndriya*). Within the framework of this minimal definition every school elaborated on its own understanding of the concept and employed various terms to indicate it, the most frequently used being *yogijñāna*, *yogipratyakṣa*, *ṛṣijñāna*, and *siddhajñāna*.

The concept of omniscience is an altogether different affair. Although the idea is linked to that of extraordinary cognitions – and it is likewise attested in many *vaidika* and non-*vaidika* traditions¹¹ – it represents a sort of theoretical escalation, and thus it is not surprising that its argumentative discussion arises relatively late in the debate. A helping hand in sketching out

⁷ See section 3.

⁸ See Frauwallner 1961.

⁹ Extraordinary cognition is usually equated to perception and thus considered an unerring cognition. The idea is expressed by terms such as *avyabhicārin* ‘non-deviant’ (like in the classical definition of perception given in *Nyāyasūtra* 1.14) or *avisamvādin* ‘non-belying’ (typical of the jargon of the Buddhist logical-epistemological school. See, for instance, Dharmakīrti’s PV 2.1).

¹⁰ Compare the definition of mystic experience offered in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection”. See Gellman 2014.

¹¹ For a cursory overview see McClintock 2010: 23-28.

the idea of omniscience may come from the work of the Buddhist thinker Ratnakīrti (11th c. CE),¹² who analyzed the question under the influence of Dharmakīrti's treatment (see particularly PV 2.29-33). In his *Sarvajñasiddhi* Ratnakīrti basically distinguished between two different ways of intending omniscience. A first one indicating the mere knowledge of all things (*sarvasarvajñatā*), regardless of space and time constraints. A second one, less bold and apparently easier to defend on philosophical grounds, corresponding to the knowledge of what is appropriate or relevant (*upayuktasarvajñatā*) to a given soteriological path, in Ratnakīrti's mind the path obviously being the one put forth by the Buddha.¹³ Even if Dharmakīrti (6th c. CE)¹⁴ famously discredited the *sarvasarvajñatā* model by comparing it to the ability of «knowing the number of worms in the universe»¹⁵, many other Buddhist thinkers – including Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, Prajñākaragupta and, of course, Ratnakīrti himself – actually engaged in defending both models of omniscience.¹⁶ As we will see below, this double way of intending omniscience will also prove crucial for the interpretation of the Brahmanical debate.

2. Ṛṣis and yogins

As I said earlier, the Brahmanical culture generally accepts the idea that there are individuals who can access things that ordinary people cannot. The notion is lastly endorsed by most philosophical traditions but the history of its reception is less straightforward than it appears at first glance, and it can be seen as an interesting example of Brahmanism accommodating a concept that might have had an altogether different origin.¹⁷ In order to clarify this a brief analysis of the figures of the *ṛṣi* and the *yogin* will follow.

2.1 The ṛṣi

The term *ṛṣi*, often translated as ‘sage’, ‘seer’ or ‘Vedic seer’, is repeatedly attested in the *Ṛgveda*. The *ṛṣi* is first and foremost the author of the hymns (*sūktas*), as seen, for example, in RV 10.33.4, where the author himself speaks as follows:

I chose Kuruśravaṇa of Trasadasyu's line as my king, most liberal to his cantors – I a seer – (transl. Jamison-Brereton 2014:1429).¹⁸

But the *ṛṣi* is not only the author of the *sūktas*, but a character himself, as testified by many passages of the corpus. For example, the well-known *vāk-sūkta* (RV 10.71) celebrates the ability of the sages of putting the message of the *Ṛgveda* into words:

¹² On the *Sarvajñasiddhi* and Ratnakīrti's treatment of omniscience see Bühnemann 1980 and Taber 2009. On *sarva*° and *upayuktasarvajñatā* see Moriyama 2014: 84-85.

¹³ In a monograph recently dedicated to the question Sara McClintock dubs these two kinds of omniscience ‘total’ and ‘dharmic’ omniscience respectively. See McClintock 2010: 35-38.

¹⁴ See Krasser 2011.

¹⁵ See PV 2.31.

¹⁶ The idea is that long and intense meditation on a given aspect of reality is able to bring it about as vividly as direct perception would. When this effort is devoted to entities which are not directly perceivable, but which have previously been verified by reason (the central tenets of Buddha's teaching, i.e. the Four Nobles' Truths, are a typical example), their cognition is clear, non-erroneous and, quite importantly, free from conceptual thought (see Eltschinger 2009: 190-199). Lastly, by implication, the knowledge of one thing is extended to all others. On this last process see McClintock 2000.

¹⁷ This is the position taken by Bronkhorst and others. See section 3 for further details.

¹⁸ *kuruśravaṇam āvṛṇi rājānam trāsadasyavam/māmhiṣṭhaṃ vāghātām ṛṣiḥ//*

When the wise have created Speech by their thought, purifying her like a coarse grain by a sieve, in this they recognized their companionship as companions. Their auspicious mark has been set down upon Speech (RV 10.71.2, transl. Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1497).¹⁹

Finally, in other passages, the *ṛṣi* is clearly seen as functional to the action *par excellence* in the Vedic culture, the sacrifice, thus epitomizing a class of supernatural beings akin to the gods yet different from them:²⁰

On the ritual grass they consecrated that sacrifice, the Man, born at the beginning. With him the gods sacrificed, (also) the Sādhyas and those who were seers. (RV 10.90.7, transl. Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1539).²¹

A more detailed characterization of the seer is later given in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*.²² In the following passage (6.1.1-5) we find the earliest analysis of the word *ṛṣi* and the functions associated to the figure:

Verily, in the beginning there was here the non-existent. As to this they say, ‘What was that non-existent?’ The Ṛṣis, assuredly, - it is they that were the non-existent. As to this they say, ‘Who were those Ṛṣis?’ The Ṛṣis, doubtless, were the vital airs: inasmuch as before (the existence of) this universe, they, desiring it, wore themselves out (*riṣ*) with toil and austerity, therefore (they are called) Ṛṣis.

This same vital air in the midst doubtless is Indra. He, by his power (*indriya*), kindled those (other) vital airs from the midst; and inasmuch as he kindled (*indh*), he is the kindler (*indha*): the kindler indeed, - him they call ‘Indra’ mystically (esoterically), for the gods love the mystic.

They (the vital airs), being kindled, created seven separate persons (*puruṣa*). They said, ‘Surely, being thus, we shall not be able to generate; let us make these seven persons one Person!’ They made those seven persons one Person: they compressed two of them (into) what is above the navel, and two of them (into) what is below the navel; (one) person was (one) wing (or side), (one) person was (the other) wing, and one person was the base (i.e. the feet).

And what excellence, what life-sap (*rasa*) there was in those seven persons, that they concentrated above, that became his head. And because (in it) they concentrated the excellence (*śrī*), therefore it is (called) the head (*śiras*). It was thereto that the breaths resorted (*śrī*): therefore also it is the head (*śiras*). And because the breaths did so resort (*śrī*) thereto, therefore also the breaths (vital airs, and their organs) are elements of excellence (*śrī*). And because they resorted to the whole (system) therefore (this is called) body (*śarīra*).

That same Person became Prajāpati (lord of generation). And that Person which became Prajāpati is this very Agni (fire-altar), who is now (to be) built (transl. Eggeling 1882: 143-144).²³

¹⁹ *sāktum iva tītaṇā punānto yātra dhūrā mānasā vācam ākrata/
ātrā sākhāyah sakhiyāni jānate bhadrāśāṃ lakṣmīr nihitādhi vācī*

²⁰ In his classical study on the Vedic poets J. Gonda affirms that “the difference between a god and a *ṛṣi*, as far as regards the qualities which they have in common, was one in degree, not in kind”. See Gonda 1963:41.

²¹ *tām yajñām barhīṣi praukṣan puruṣaṃ jātām agratāḥ /
tēna devā ayajanta sādhiyā ṛṣayaś ca yé*

²² The text belongs to the *Yajurveda* tradition and, although difficult to date with certainty, it is surely later than the *Ṛgveda*. According to the standard chronology the *brāhmaṇa* period immediately follows that of the *saṃhitās*, thus corresponding to the 8th -7th c. BCE. It is nonetheless possible that the final recension of all those texts was considerably later.

²³ *asadvā idamagra āsīt. tadāhuḥ kiṃ tadasadāsīdityṛṣayo vāva te gre sadāsīt tadāhuḥ ke ta ṛṣaya iti prāṇā vā
ṛṣayaste yatpurāsmāt sarvasmādidamichantaḥ śrameṇa tapasārīṣaṃstasmādrṣayaḥ dhyata indriyeṇaiddha
yadaiddha tasmāddindha indho ha vai tam.*

*so yo yam madhye prāṇaḥ eṣa evendrastāneṣa prāṇānmaindra ityācakṣate paro ‘kṣam paro ‘kṣakāmā hi devasta
iddhāḥ sapta nānā puruṣānasrjanta.*

*te ‘bruvan. na vā itthaṃ santaḥ śakṣyāmaḥ prajanayitumimāntsapta puruṣāṇekam puruṣaṃ karavāmeti ta
etānsapta puruṣāṇekam puruṣamakurvanyadūrdhvaṃ nābhestau dvau samaubjanyadavānnābhestau dvau pakṣaḥ
puruṣaḥ pakṣaḥ puruṣaḥ*

*pratiṣṭhaika āsīt. atha yaiteṣāṃ saptānām puruṣāṇām śrīḥ. yo rasa āsīttamūrdhvaṃ samudau hastadasya
śīro ‘bhavadyaḥchriyaṃ samudauhamstasmāchirastasmīnnetasminprāṇā aśrayanta
tasmādvēvaitachiro ‘tha yatprāṇā aśrayanta tasmādu prāṇāḥ śrīyau ‘tha
yatsarvasmin aśrayanta tasmādu śarīram.*

The passage adds interesting information to what we already know from the *R̥gveda*. First, the *ṛṣis* play an active role in the manifestation of the universe: they represent the first step in the creation of the world, in a process that goes on with Indra and ends with Prajāpati, the prototypical person. They are seven²⁴ and are associated – in a pattern that is missing in the *R̥gveda* but will become a common trope in Upaniṣadic literature – with the vital airs (*ta ṛṣaya iti prāṇāḥ*). Second, the *ṛṣis* are able to originate the universe on the basis of their own austerities and toil (*tapasā śrameṇa*). To strengthen this idea, the author of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* proposes an etymology according to which the very name *ṛṣi* is linked to the practice of asceticism.

The next set of texts to be investigated are the ancient Upaniṣads, possibly composed over a period covering most of the first millennium BCE.²⁵ In depicting the seers, the oldest Upaniṣads display the same pattern of the *R̥gveda* and the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*: the *ṛṣis* are embedded in a template that binds micro- and macrocosm (hence they are repeatedly equated with the vital airs), and their position as semi-divine creatures closely connected to the Veda is frequently restated; consider, for instance, the following passage of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.*:

Now this Self is a world for all beings. So when he makes offerings and sacrifices, he becomes thereby a world for the gods. When he recites the Vedas, he becomes thereby a world for the seers. When he offers libation to his ancestors and seeks to father offspring, he becomes thereby a world for his ancestors (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.* 1.4.16, transl. Olivelle 1998:17).²⁶

Now, apart from the traditional association between the seers and the faculty of seeing,²⁷ it is worth noting that the oldest strata of Brahmanical literature show no interest in *ṛṣis*' epistemological capabilities, and in the *saṃhitas* these figures generally perform functions that are strictly associated with the sacrificial setting and the gods.²⁸ The oldest source that challenges this paradigm is the foundational text of the Indian tradition of semantic analysis, Yāska's *Nirukta*. In an oft-quoted and scholarly discussed passage,²⁹ the work attributes to the seers some peculiar characteristics destined to become standard motifs in the ensuing representations:³⁰

The Ṛṣis (Seers of the Vedic Hymn) had direct access to Dharma [ritual and social duty]; through [this initial] instruction they transmitted the Vedic hymns to later generations who did not have direct access

sa eva puruṣaḥ prajāpatirabhavat. sa yaḥ sa puruṣaḥ prajāpatir abhavad ayameva sa yo 'yamagnīścīyate.

²⁴ See also RV 4.42.8.

²⁵ The oldest ones (or rather those containing the oldest strata of texts) are the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.* and the *Chāndogya Up.*, which are traditionally considered pre-Buddhist and thus possibly belong to the 7th or 6th c. BCE. In contrast, the most recent ones, (such as the *Īśā Up.*, the *Śvetāśvatara Up.* and the *Muṇḍaka Up.*) were composed in verses and are of a much later period, probably the last centuries BCE.

²⁶ *atho ayam ātma sarveṣāṃ bhūtānāṃ lokāḥ. sa yaj juhōti yad yajate tena devānāṃ lokāḥ. atha yad anubrūte tena ṛṣīnāṃ. atha yat pitṛbhyor nīpṛṇāti yat prajāṃ icchate tena pitṛnāṃ.*

²⁷ See, for example, *Nirukta* 2.11.

²⁸ J. Gonda (1963: 40) suggested that the word *ṛṣi* is linked to the German *rasen* and the Lithuanian *aršus* “violent, heated”, thus indicating somebody inspired/possessed by the gods, similarly to the Greek ἐνθουσιαστής.

²⁹ See, for instance, the extended discussions in Aklujkar 2009, Falk 1996 and Wezler 2001.

³⁰ The traditional position is nicely summarized by J. Gonda: “The *ṛṣis* are, in the Indian traditional view, said to have visualized the mystic form of *vāc*- which according to the Indian conception is a more sacred idea than our ‘speech’, carrying with it a far deeper significance [...] It is therefore emphatically stated that *vāc*- reveals her real nature only to those who possess sufficient spiritual insight to get into the ultimate essence of things”. However, Gonda is not explicit enough in saying that such a position is a later elaboration, unattested in the oldest strata of the Vedic corpus and possibly developed for the first time in the *Nirukta*. See Gonda 1963: 42. Detailed treatments of the *ṛṣis* are also found in Mitchiner 2000 and Witzel 2009.

to Dharma; later, inferior generations, being ill at ease with regard to the instructions, compiled this delimited work (= the Nighaṇṭu) for the comprehension [of the meaning of the Mantras] bit by bit; moreover they compiled the Veda and the Vedāṅgas (*Nirukta* 1.20 transl. Kahrs 1998: 28).³¹

The innovations are clear: the text claims that the ṛṣis transmit the Veda to the later generations and, most importantly, that such a capability hinges on their having a direct, immediate access to *dharma*. In this context, the use of the term *sākṣātkṛta* suggests that the ṛṣis are able to see *dharma* directly, without impediments, as clearly as in direct perception. This is certainly an explicit instance of extraordinary cognition, if not even of something close to omniscience. We are not informed whether the ṛṣis are able to cognize all minutiae. Certainly, their ability to ‘see’ the Veda seems not very far from Ratnakīrti’s idea of *upayuktasarvajñatā*.³²

A further detachment from the ‘old’ Ṛgvedic representation of the ṛṣis is testified in the later Upaniṣads. A striking example appears in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (henceforth MU) where one can read the following lines:

The seers, sated with knowledge, when they have attained him [the Self],
become free from passion and tranquil, and their selves are made perfect (MU 3.2.5, transl. Olivelle 1998: 276).³³

This small bit of text is quite significant, since it explicitly connects the ṛṣis with knowledge by suggesting that they enjoy a peculiar insight that makes them ‘free from passion and tranquil’. The text does not say that ṛṣis are omniscient but it is beyond doubt that this kind of knowledge is regarded as highly valuable. Furthermore, the passage links the ṛṣis – a significant element of the standard Vedic worldview – to the presumably new idea of the knowledge of the Self as well as to the notion of deliverance from the cycle of rebirths.

The last step in the process of emancipation of the figure of the ṛṣi from the original Ṛgvedic ideology is displayed in the Epics.³⁴ In both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* ṛṣis are ubiquitous. Although they are clearly distinguished from ordinary beings by virtue of their special abilities (which are mostly due to the practice of austerities) they clearly display human features and assume human behaviors. But, and this is the aspect that most concerns us, in the Epics the association with omniscience finally becomes explicit. It is sufficient to consider a passage from the *Āraṇyakaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (henceforth MBh) in which Yudhiṣṭhira tries to persuade Draupadī of the importance of clinging to *dharma*. The argument presented by Yudhiṣṭhira is prototypical: the knowledge of *dharma* is founded on the Veda, which is in turn ‘seen’ by the ṛṣis. MBh 3.32.13 tells us that the ṛṣis have «cognitions of the [Vedic] scriptures [as clearly] as in a perception» (*pratyakṣāgamabuddhayaḥ*). The association with *dharma* is further reinforced in 3.32.11:

Vyāsa, Vasiṣṭha, Maitreya, Nārada, Lomaśa, Śuka
and the other ṛṣis have a purified mind only by virtue of *dharma*.³⁵

³¹ *sākṣātkṛtadharmāṇa ṛṣayo babhūvus te ‘varebhyo ‘sākṣātkṛtadharmabhyā upadeśena mantrān samprādur upadeśāya glāyanto ‘vare bilmagrahaṇāyemaṇi granthaṇi samāmnāsiṣur vedaṇi ca vedāṅgāni ca.*

³² The date of the *Nirukta* is a puzzle. Most of the scholarly efforts have been directed at establishing whether Yāska knew Pāṇini but the results so far have been dubious. Kahrs aptly condenses this uncertainty proposing a composition date for the *Nirukta* that spans from the 7th to the 3rd c. BCE (Kahrs 1998: 14). Also in this case it is probable that different layers of text piled up over a considerable amount of time and that a definitive recension was assembled much later.

³³ *saṃprāpyainam ṛṣayo jñānatṛptāḥ kṛtātmāno vītarāgāḥ praśāntāḥ/*

³⁴ The dates of both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* is another puzzle. Although they present mythical and literary material that are much older, they did not reach their definitive form until well into the first centuries CE. See Samuel 2008: 64 and Hildebeitel 2001.

³⁵ *vyāso vasiṣṭho maitreyo nārado lomaśaḥ śukaḥ /*

Finally, MBh 3.32.21 explicitly affirms *r̥ṣis*' omniscience:

Kṛṣṇa, do not doubt the *dharma* practiced by the learned men,
the ancient [*dharma*] declared by the *r̥ṣis* who know and see all!³⁶

The passage unveils the final stage in the *r̥ṣi*'s representation, a stage which remarkably differs from the 'cosmic connections' ideology³⁷ of the Vedic beginnings. The *r̥ṣi* is now seen as an omniscient being who embodies *dharma*, and his knowledge is explicitly equated with that of the whole Veda.

2.2 The yogin

Soon after the lines discussed above, the MU presents the following verse:

The ascetics who have firmly determined their goal through a full knowledge of the Vedānta, have their being purified by the discipline of renunciation. In the worlds of Brahman, at the time of the final end, having become fully immortal, they will all be fully liberated (MU 3.2.6, transl. Olivelle 1998: 276).³⁸

The text is referring to another way of gaining salvation that contrasts with the one describing the seers and is reserved to individuals who, at least according to the author(s) of the MU, differ from them. We are told they are ascetics (literally 'strivers', *yatin*) whose beings have been purified (*śuddhasattva*) by means of the discipline of renunciation (*saṃnyāsayoga*). Although the same final emancipation is prospected for both categories, ('they will all be fully liberated': *parimucyante sarve*) the 'strivers' are indeed characterized by the practice of asceticism, something that in the MU does not concern the *r̥ṣis*. The MU seems thus to refer to another typical figure of Brahmanism and later Hinduism: the practitioner of yoga, who will end up being the second prototype of an omniscient person. A *yogin* is somebody who, by implementing psycho-physical practices, can attain knowledge that is beyond the ordinary. The figure is typically associated with the *Yogaśāstra* but, quite probably, it was known well before the establishment of yoga as a systematic tradition. Although the Vedic culture surely knew some form of asceticism,³⁹ it seems that the original purpose of those practices was similar to that of the sacrifice, namely to obtain both mundane benefits and rewards in heaven after death.⁴⁰ Practicing asceticism in order to release oneself from the cycle of births might have been a feature of some components of the Vedic culture but there is reason to believe that those strands developed later and that the very ideas of retribution of actions and the cycle of births were a product of the *śramaṇa* movements (mainly Jainism, Ājīvikism and Buddhism) active since the 5th c. BCE in the Eastern Gangetic plain.⁴¹

To outline a history of the epistemological capabilities of *yogins* is not an easy task. The ancient Upaniṣads show no acquaintance with yoga, apart from explicit mentions in the *Kaṭha*

anye ca r̥ṣayah siddhā dharmēṇaiva sucetasah //

³⁶ *śiṣṭair ācaritaṃ dharmam kṛṣṇa mā smātīśaṅkithāḥ /
purāṇam r̥ṣibhiḥ proktaṃ sarvajñaiḥ sarvadarśibhiḥ //*

³⁷ See Olivelle 1998: lii-lvi.

³⁸ *vedāntavijñānasuniścītārthāḥ saṃnyāsayogād yatayah śuddhasattvāḥ/
te brahmalokeṣu parāntakāle parāmṛtāḥ parimucyante sarve//*

³⁹ See Bronkhorst 1998: 36-44.

⁴⁰ See Samuel 2008: 119-120.

⁴¹ See Bronkhorst 2007; Samuel 2008: 154 and 343-346. See also below for further details.

and in the *Śvetāśvatara*, which however belong to a later period⁴² that probably overlaps with the composition of the oldest strata of the Epics. In the MBh the influence of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition is well established and references to characters showing yogic capabilities (in the MBh often labeled *yogasiddha*) abound.⁴³

Hence, for a systematic analysis of yogic powers one has to look at the *locus classicus* of the discussion, namely the third section (*vibhūtipāda*) of Patañjali's *Yogasūtras* (henceforth YS), the foundational text of the yoga tradition which was probably composed as recent as between the 4th and the 5th c. CE.⁴⁴ In it eight special powers (known as *siddhis*: minuteness, lightness, greatness, range, irresistible will, mastery, sovereignty, omnipotence) are mentioned as the results of correct yogic concentration (*saṃyama*). They are alluded to in YS 3.45 and made explicit in the corresponding *Bhāṣya*:

Of these [powers], becoming minute is to be like an atom. Lightness – he becomes light; greatness – he becomes great; range – he could touch the moon with a finger-tip; irresistible will – he can dive into the solid ground and move about there as if it were water; mastery – by this he can master the elements and elementals, and himself is not mastered by any others; sovereignty – he can will the production, absorption and disposition of them; omnipotence – his purposive idea becomes true, so that whatever that purpose, so the states of the elements and their natures become.⁴⁵ (transl. Leggett 1990: 348).

The *siddhis* mentioned in this passage are typical examples of extraordinary cognitions, but the *Yogaśāstra* does not limit its consideration to them.⁴⁶ It clearly envisions a further kind of extraordinary knowledge the *yogin* is able to experience, which is described as follows:

Only who is aware of the distinction between the intellect and the *puruṣa* is the ruler of all entities and possesses omniscience. (YS 3.49)⁴⁷

Therefore, once the *yogin* is able to tell the difference between the intellect and the *puruṣa*, by distinguishing instantaneously all the *guṇas* making up the Prakṛti, he becomes omniscient.⁴⁸ The commentator Vyāsa equates such omniscience to a state of freedom from sorrow⁴⁹ but he does not see it as the last step towards liberation. In order to reach the final release a *yogin*

⁴² See Olivelle 1998: xxxvii.

⁴³ For references see Malinar 2011: 33-60.

⁴⁴ See Larson-Bhattacharya 2008: 184.

⁴⁵ *atrāṇimā bhavaty aṇuḥ. laghimā laghur bhavati. mahimā mahān bhavati. prāptir aṅgulyagreṇāpi sprśati candramasam. prākāmyam icchānabhighātaḥ. bhūmāv unmajjati nimajjati yathodake. vaśitvaṃ bhūtabhautikeṣu vaśī bhavaty avaśyaś cānyeṣām. īśīrtvaṃ teṣāṃ prabhavāpyavyūhānām īṣṭe. yatra kāmāvasāyitvaṃ satyasamkalpatā yathā samkalpas tathā bhūtaprakṛtīnām avasthānam.*

⁴⁶ Furthermore, the role of the *siddhis* has been frequently questioned. A number of scholars have minimized their importance in the YS's theoretical picture (see Jacobsen 2011: 14-15 and Mallinson 2011:139), perceiving them as an irrational motif clearly contradicting Patañjali's rational approach (see Feuerstein 1996: 101). This argument is chiefly based on YS 3.37 (*te samādhāv upasargā vyutthāne siddhayaḥ*), a passage in which Patañjali seems to regard the *siddhis* as obstacles for the final goal of Yoga practice, liberation. In this perspective, the *siddhis* are regarded as a sort of peripheral by-product of the path the *yogin* follows towards final enlightenment. The *yogins* acquire them during the process but they are not crucial, at least according to most interpretations, for achieving deliverance.

⁴⁷ *sattvapuruṣānyatākhyātīmātrasya sarvabhāvādhiṣṭhātṛtvaṃ sarvajñātṛtvaṃ ca.*

⁴⁸ *sarvajñātṛtvaṃ sarvātmanām guṇānām śāntoditāvyapadeśyadharmatvena vyavasthitānām akramoparuddhaṃ vivekajaṃ jñānam ity arthaḥ.* «To be omniscient means to possess a discriminative, simultaneous knowledge of the *guṇas* that make up the whole [universe], which are determined as 'pacified, raised and inexplicable'».

⁴⁹ *ity eṣā viśokā nāma siddhir yām prāpya yogī sarvajñāḥ kṣīṇakleśabandhano vazī viharati (Bhāṣya on YS 3.49).* «Having gained that perfection – i.e. a condition of absence of sorrow – the *yogin* acts as an omniscient being, as a being devoid of afflictions, as a ruler».

must also get rid of omniscience, as pointed out by the ensuing *sūtra*, YS 3.50.⁵⁰

3. The 5th c. CE turn

We have seen so far that the early Brahmanical speculation, in particular from the late first millennium BCE onwards, attributed to the *ṛṣi* and the *yogin* extraordinary epistemological capabilities to the point of considering them omniscient. Nevertheless, despite the relative abundance of this material, it is difficult to find in this early phase a philosophical characterization of yogic perceptions, let alone instances in which the epistemological abilities of *ṛṣis* and *yogins* are explicitly discussed. The passages of the MU quoted above seem to suggest that the two figures concretize two different paths to attain liberation but even in that case the text says little about their cognitive capacities. Still, the notion somehow endures and comes back to the surface in an expanded form later on, roughly from the 5th c. CE onwards. This period is historically crucial since it marks the onset of a systematic commentarial tradition, a typical feature of the classical Indian speculation. It is thus not by chance that at this time the debate on extraordinary perceptions shows a substantial evolution.⁵¹ The first instance to take into consideration are two passages from Praśastapāda's *Padārthadharmasaṃgraha* (5th/6th CE), the most influential text in the Vaiśeṣika tradition. In it the extraordinary capabilities of *yogins* and *ṛṣis* appear to be contrasted;⁵² the knowledge of the former is defined thus:

But for yogis, who are superior to us, when [in the condition called] *yukta*, an unerring seeing of the object's own nature arises, by virtue of [their] internal organ [which] is assisted by *dharma* arising from yoga, in regard to [the following substances:] their own *ātman* and [the *ātman* of] others, ether, space, time, atoms, air and the internal organ, [as well as] in regard to the qualities, actions, universals and ultimate individuators which are inherent in these [substances], and in regard to [the category] inherence. Furthermore, for [yogis in the condition called] *viyukta*, perceptual knowledge arises in regard to objects which are fine (*sūkṣma*), concealed [from sight], or at a [great] distance [...] (Transl. Isaacson 1993: 146).⁵³

As for the *ṛṣis* Praśastapāda affirms:

In the *Ṛṣis*, the creators of tradition, by virtue of a conjunction between the internal organ and the self, and of a special merit, an intuitive cognition (*prātibha*) arises, which furnishes an infallible vision regarding objects which exceed sensorial faculties and belong to the past, the future or the present – such as *dharma* –, and which may, or may not, figure in revealed texts. This form of cognition is, primarily, widespread among the divine seers, but sometimes it may also occur among ordinary beings, as when a little girl says: “Tomorrow, my brother will come, it is my heart to say so”.⁵⁴ (Transl. Torella 2012: 471-

⁵⁰ *tadvairagyād api doṣabijakṣaye kaivalyam*. «By detaching from that too, when the seeds of faults are destroyed, then absolute independence takes place».

⁵¹ The earliest philosophical commentaries known to us – Vātsyāyana's *Nyāyabhāṣya*, Śābara's *Mīmāṃsāsūtrabhāṣya* and Praśastapāda's *Padārthadharmasaṃgraha* – all presumably belong to this age, even if their respective chronology is uncertain.

⁵² See the discussion in Torella 2012: 470-471.

⁵³ *asmadviśiṣṭānāṃ tu yogināṃ yuktānāṃ yogajadharmāṇugrhitena manasā svātmāntarākāśadikkālaparamāṇu vāyumanassu tatsamavetaḡaṇakarmasāmānyaviśeṣeṣu samavāye cāvitathāṃ svarūpadarśanam utpadyate. viyuktānāṃ punaś catuṣṭayasannikarṣād yogajadharmāṇugrahasāmarthyāt sūkṣmavyavahitaviprakṛṣṭeṣu pratyākṣam utpadyate*. PDhS: 455.

⁵⁴ *āmnāyavidhātṛṇāṃ ṛṣiṇāṃ atītānāgatavartamāṇeṣv atīndriyeṣvārtheṣu dharmādiṣu granthopanibaddheṣv anupanibaddheṣu cātmamanasoḥ saṃyogād dharmaviśeṣāc ca yat prātibhaṃ yathārthanivedanaṃ jñānam*

Praśastapāda here seems to introduce an apparently new dichotomy between the epistemological capacities of a *ṛṣi* and that of a *yogin*. Although the results of such capacities are not so different (a veridical cognition of the true nature of an object inaccessible to ordinary people), the *yogin* is able to experience extraordinary knowledge because his mind is assisted by a special quality brought about by the practice of yoga (*yogajadharmāṇugrhitena manasā*). Conversely, for the *ṛṣi* this capacity is innate; it does not require any training but is yielded by something much more indefinite, which the text defines as a special quality or merit (*dharmaviśeṣāc*).⁵⁵

With the due differences, a similar attitude is to be found in another crucial work of the period, Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* (henceforth VP). Bhartṛhari's texts⁵⁶ show no signs of the expressions used to indicate extraordinary cognitions, still it is obvious that the author accepted their validity. In a subsection of the first chapter of the VP (VP 1.30 to 1.43), mostly dedicated to epistemological questions, the author states that cognitions deriving from traditional knowledge are more reliable than those based on inferential reasoning.⁵⁷ By doing so, he admits the existence of persons whose epistemological capabilities exceed the ordinary. Consider the following passages:

a) The knowledge of the past and the future of those whose minds are not afflicted, and whose knowledge is manifest, is not different from perception.⁵⁸

And:

b) The word of those who, having a visionary eye, see entities that are not perceivable and are beyond the senses, is not invalidated by inference.⁵⁹

Bhartṛhari refers to persons whose epistemological capacities are not afflicted by error (*anupapluta*), who see something which is not normally knowable (*asaṃvedya*) and which is beyond the purview of the senses (*atīndriya*). The commentary (*Vṛtti*) on these verses is even more explicit, suggesting that these extraordinary capacities are something quite close to omniscience:

c) Moreover, the cultivated people (*śiṣṭa*), whose faults have been burned through austerities, having cognitions free of hindrances, see the whole (*sarvaṃ paśyanti*) as embracing [all] forms put together without errors (*avyabharitam*), as if it were a perception [happening as] a reflection in their own minds.⁶⁰

Consider also these two further passages from the *Vṛtti*:

utpadyate tad arṣam ity ācakṣate. tat tu prastāreṇa devaṛṣiṇāṃ kadācid eva laukikānāṃ yathā kanyakā bravīti 'śvo me bhrātāganteti hṛdayaṃ me kathayati iti. PDhS: 601.

⁵⁵ See Lyssenko 1998: 101-102.

⁵⁶ An ancient *Vṛtti* traditionally ascribed to Bhartṛhari comments on the *kārikās* of the VP. This attribution has been put into question by some modern scholars who claim that the work was composed by another (later) author. See Ferrante 2013 for a list of works relevant to the problem. In what follows I adopt the traditional stance according to which the two texts are from the same author.

⁵⁷ See Ferrante forth.

⁵⁸ *āvirbhūtaprakāśānām anupaplutacetāsām/ atītānāgatajñānaṃ pratyakṣān na viśiṣyate //* (VP 1.37)

⁵⁹ *atīndriyān asaṃvedyān paśyanty ārṣeṇa cakṣuṣā /*

ye bhāvān vacanaṃ teṣāṃ nānumānena bādhyate // (VP 1.38)

⁶⁰ *atha ca tapasā nirdagdhadōṣā nirāvaranakhyaṭayaḥ śiṣṭāḥ pratibimbakalpena pratyakṣam iva svāsu khyātiṣu saṃkrāntākāraparigrahaṃ avyabharitam sarvaṃ paśyanti.* (*Vṛtti* on VP 1.37).

d) The Inner-Controller (*antaryāmin*), the totality of atoms which is the basis of what causes the manifestation (*abhijātinimittanibandhana*), the non-manifested word-principle (*śabdabrahman*) which is the locus of powers, the deities, the consequence of actions and their ability to cause an expected result and inability to produce different results, the single subtle body which transmigrates (*ātivāhika*) and all the other things known in the doctrines of the masters that are not knowable through the senses, like colors and so forth, and not knowable for every Self, as goodness and so on – [all these things] the cultivated people grasp without errors with an eye that is different from the ordinary one.⁶¹

e) For every school, and for every individual, there are trustworthy persons. Their words are unquestioned (*avicārita*) and, as if they were one's own perception, cannot be absolutely doubted. On the basis of their cognition one can trust even what it is not seen, just like a stone floating etc.⁶²

These passages from the *Vṛtti* offer an interesting list of things a perfected person (in this context called either *śiṣṭa* or *āpta*) is able to know. First of all, it must be noted that when the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.37 says that the *śiṣṭas*, by purifying their minds through austerities (*tapasā nirdagdhadoṣa*) can see all (*sarvaṃ paśyanti*), it is evidently speaking of omniscient persons. In this case, the expression *sarvaṃ paśyanti* certainly does not refer to the knowledge of all petty things, but rather to that unitary metaphysical principle, Brahman, which Bhartṛhari regards as the basis and the source of all phenomena. Since for him the knowledge of Brahman has soteriological relevance, he seems to endorse a notion of omniscience that shows affinities with Ratnakīrti's definition of *upayuktasarvajñatā*. In harmony with the whole history of the debate on omniscience, this knowledge is regarded as vivid as a perception, a fact which is also suggested by the use of the root *drś-* instead of a more neutral *jñā-*. And it is also confirmed both by the *Vṛtti* on 1.38, where the perfected person is said to have an 'eye' that is different from the ordinary one (*vyāvahārikād anyenaiva cakṣusā*), and by the *Vṛtti* on 1.39 in which the cognitions of such a perfected person are said to be equal to one's own visual perception (*svam iva darśanam*).

Passage d) quoted from the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.38 adds further information. Bhartṛhari enlists a series of metaphysical tenets he regards as inaccessible to sense perception. Quite interestingly, he refers to various ideas upheld within the classical *darśanas* or, more generally, in *smārta* Brahmanism, including his own theory of *śabdabrahman*. A 'capable' person – he says – grasps all those tenets without errors. But who are these 'able persons' and why are they considered omniscient? Even if the fact is not patently expressed as it is in the *Padārthadharmasamgraha*, the VP, too, seems to contrast the two ways of gaining extraordinary insights embodied by the *ṛṣi* and the *yogin*. *Ṛṣis* are well documented in the text. Bhartṛhari mentions them several times in the *kārikās*, accepting what the Brahmanical tradition has elaborated and handed down to him. The seers are clearly omniscient beings, they have direct knowledge of *dharma* and see the subtle form of the Veda, which is permanent and beyond the range of the senses.⁶³ Then they transmit the Veda to mankind, by imposing differentiation on what was originally one.⁶⁴ Crucially, no mention is made of the

⁶¹ *antaryāmiṇaṃ aṇugrāmaṃ abhijātinimittanibandhanam anabhivyaktaṃ śabdabrahma śaktyadhiṣṭhānaṃ devatāḥ karmaṇāṃ anubandhapariṇāmaśaktivaikalyāni sūkṣmāṃ ātivāhikāṃ śarīraṃ pṛthag anyāṃś ca tīrthapravādeṣu prasiddhān arthān rūpādivad indriyair agrāhyān sukhādivat pratyātmam asaṃvedyān, ye śiṣṭā vyāvahārikād anyenaiva cakṣuṣā muktasamśayam upālabhante.* (*Vṛtti* on VP 1.38).

⁶² *santi praticaraṇaṃ pratipurusaṃ cāptāḥ. yeṣāṃ vacanam avicāritaṃ svam iva darśanam atyantam anatiśaṅkānyam. yeṣāṃ cādr̥ṣṭam api śilāplavanādi pratayena śakyaṃ śraddhātum.* (*Vṛtti* on VP 1.39).

⁶³ See *Vṛtti* on VP 1.5: *sūkṣmāṃ nityāṃ atīndriyāṃ vācam ṛṣayaḥ śakṣātkṛtadharmāṇo mantradṛśaḥ paśyanti.* «The *ṛṣis* who know the mantras and have direct, perceptual access to *dharma*, see the word that is subtle, eternal and beyond the senses».

⁶⁴ See VP 1.5: *prāptiupāyo 'nukāraś ca tasya vedo mahar̥ṣibhiḥ/ eko'py anekavartmeva samāmnātāḥ pṛthak pṛthak//*

fact that the *ṛṣis* practice some kind of asceticism to grasp the Veda in its unitary form. By contrast, as far as can we glean from the *Vṛtti*, the process is quite effortless.

At first sight, in the VP the *yogin* prototype is less emphasized. The single most important reference to yoga in the *kārikās* is contained in VP 2.152 where yoga is enlisted as one of the six sources of intuitive knowledge or *pratibhā*. Concerning this the *Vṛtti* remarks that the expression refers to *yogins* who are able to know, among other things, the intentions of other people.⁶⁵ Yet, I believe that the distinguishing characteristics of the *yogin* prototype are not absent in the VP. Indeed, they come to the surface in a further figure we already stumbled across in the passages above, the *śiṣṭa*. In the Pāṇinian grammatical tradition a *śiṣṭa* is a member of the Brahmanical learned elite, traditionally regarded as the most reliable source of correct linguistic usage. As already noted by Madhav Deshpande,⁶⁶ Bhartṛhari's conception of the *śiṣṭa* largely differs from that of his predecessors, especially Patañjali's. In comparison to the latter, Bhartṛhari not only considered the *śiṣṭa* as a semi-divine being no longer alive in his time – and hence unable to act as an ideal living speaker for the grammarians – but he went further: he reshaped his role and provided him with epistemological and soteriological significance. In the passages quoted above the *śiṣṭas* are in fact said to «grasp without errors with an eye that is different from the ordinary one» all the subtle and metaphysical items that lie beyond the range of ordinary humans: clearly, they are omniscient beings. But where does their omniscience come from? Differently from the *ṛṣis*, the *śiṣṭas* must earn this capacity by practicing austerities (see the *Vṛtti* on VP 1.37 above), and, with austerity, Bhartṛhari is first and foremost thinking of grammar.⁶⁷ Once grammar is mastered, even with some pain as Vṛṣabhadeva wittily remarks,⁶⁸ the avenue leading to the knowledge of the Veda,⁶⁹ which is in turn none other than the linguistic manifestation of Brahman in the world, is open. The opposition between an immediate kind of extraordinary knowledge and a mediate one is thus also kept in the VP but with a crucial shift: the latter one is not embodied by the *yogin*, but rather by the *śiṣṭa*. This implies a further point: even if (historical) *śiṣṭas* are long gone by his time and Brahman and omniscience are certainly difficult prizes to achieve, Bhartṛhari believed that reaching the state of omniscience (i.e. the realization of Brahman) was indeed possible. The *śiṣṭa* becomes thus a soteriological model, epitomizing a path that, once followed, leads to a blissful condition that is theoretically attainable by everybody.⁷⁰

Conclusions

I think that the discussion above offers an interesting example of the way salient features of

«The Veda is the means of obtaining that [Brahman] and an imitation of it.

Although one, it has been handed down separately by the great seers, as if it had different paths».

⁶⁵ *Vṛtti* on 2.152: *yoganimitā kācit. tadyathā yoginām avyabhicāreṇa parābhiprāyajñānādiṣu.*

⁶⁶ See Deshpande 1994.

⁶⁷ See VP 1.11.

⁶⁸ See Vṛṣabhadeva's *Sphuṭākṣarā* (VP p. 40, l. 17: *vyākaraṇādhyāyanād bhūyiṣṭhaṃ duḥkham ity uttamaṃ vyākaraṇaṃ duḥkhaḥhetutvāt tapaḥ*): «From the study of grammar comes great pain, hence grammar, since it causes pain, is the highest austerity».

⁶⁹ See VP 1.16: *idam ādyaṃ padasthānaṃ siddhisopānaparvanām/ iyaṃ sā mokṣamānānām ajihmarājapaddhatih/*

«This [grammar] is the first step of the stairway that leads to realization.

It is the straight royal road of the ones who have liberation as their goal».

⁷⁰ As for the way Bhartṛhari intends the path leading to the absolute reality there is no scholarly consensus, mainly due to the lack of information in the texts. Iyer 1964 and Bronkhorst 1995 offer two different views on the question, which I tried to reconcile in Ferrante 2014.

the Brahmanical intellectual landscape were gradually modified and developed by Brahmanical thinkers and eventually accommodated into the framework of their own sets of values. Values that were much more historically determined than one tends to think. The two figures who exemplify extraordinary cognition/omniscience in the mature phase of the Brahmanical speculation – the *ṛṣi* and the *yogin* – probably were of different origin. Yet, in the earliest texts, their epistemological features were far from being opposed as one may be tempted to infer from later sources. In the Vedic material the seer is first and foremost a poet associated with the words of the Veda but is never characterized by specific epistemic abilities, let alone by omniscience. This characterization is absent also in the *Nirukta*, in which, however, some kind of intuitional knowledge granted to the seers starts to emerge, and appears to be a common trope only from the epic period onwards. The opposition between immediate knowledge characterizing the seer and mediate knowledge typical of the *yogin* is indeed the last to manifest. A first hint can be traced in the later Upaniṣadic tradition (see the MU passage above) but a substantial polarization becomes common in certain strands of Brahmanical thought only from the 5th c. CE onwards, as one can appreciate in Praśastapāda and Bhartṛhari's works. This polarization takes place by stressing the mediate character of the *yogin*'s insights, which are generally seen as the results of austerities and psychophysical training as opposed to the 'pure' intuitive knowledge of the seer. Still, such a dichotomy is not present in the oldest texts of the Brahmanical tradition, in which also the powers of the *ṛṣis* are clearly bound to some form of asceticism. Then, what might be the reason behind this innovation?

To answer such a question is not easy and one inevitably leans to the side of speculation. Even if the material collected here is far from being exhaustive, one may attempt to read the historical development of the debate on extraordinary cognitions in socio-religious terms, that is as an effort to integrate within philosophy tendencies that were probably becoming more and more widespread in the religious landscape of the Gupta age, as testified by the composition of the *Yogasūtras* themselves. At this time, some thinkers possibly tried to harmonize the teachings of the Vedic tradition with aspects that were clearly not contemplated in the Vedic texts, such as the belief in yogic capacities. This reading matches well with recent interpretations of the cultural dynamics of pre-modern India, in particular with the one proposed by J. Bronkhorst in his thought-provoking *Greater Magadha*.⁷¹ In it the author interpreted the cultural history of early India as an encounter between two radically different worldviews, one embodied by the Vedic culture, the other by the religious ideologies developed in the eastern Gangetic plain (in the historical region of Magadha), such as Ājīvikism, Jainism and Buddhism. In opposition to the traditional stance that considers ideas such as the beliefs in rebirth and in karmic retribution as gradually developed within the Vedic culture, Bronkhorst maintains that these concepts were actually alien to the Brahmanical culture and originated in that of Magadha. Then, over time, in a process that lasted centuries, Brahmanism accepted and integrated these ideas, which eventually ended up figuring as fundamental tenets of what is now labeled Hinduism.⁷² Even though this model can be considered disputable – and in fact it is, not because it questions established interpretations, but because it requires a substantial and problematical revision of the chronology of many basic texts⁷³ – I believe it has at least one considerable merit: it depicts

⁷¹ See Bronkhorst 2007 but also Samuel 2008.

⁷² A discussion of the idea of Hinduism, the origin of the concept and its historical fluctuation is well beyond the scope of this essay. I am using the term quite commonsensically to denote what was (and is) neither Buddhism nor Jainism.

⁷³ Bronkhorst's stance is discussed and criticized, for example, in Neelis 2008 and Wynne 2011.

the Brahmanical world as a far less monolithic entity than it usually is and with a fair deal of internal complexity. Moreover, the model underlines how the process of absorption and integration of notions which were developed outside the Brahmanical field was troublesome and slow, even for concepts that are normally seen as ‘quintessentially Brahmanical’, such as the belief in karmic retribution. The relationship between Brahmanism and the rest was thus one of constant clash, dialogue and assimilation, and the response to the challenges from this ‘outside world’ was by no means homogenous, but varied from school to school and from author to author. This attitude is displayed also in the problem discussed here. The idea that an individual is able to know something beyond the ordinary, to the point of experiencing omniscience, does not look like an original feature of Vedic Brahmanism and, in the case of the *ṛṣi*, the association with extraordinary cognitive abilities is no earlier than the late Upaniṣadic period. Yet, by the early centuries CE, probably due to the influence of the *śramaṇa* movements, the idea of individuals capable of extraordinary knowledge might have become so widespread that Brahmanical intellectual elites were forced to face it. The reaction was diverse. Some strands, such as the Mīmāṃsā, vehemently rejected the idea. Others, such as the Vaiśeṣikas and Bhartṛhari, accepted it and attempted to integrate it without harm to the Vedic ideology. By doing so, they attributed to the *ṛṣi* the extraordinary abilities typical of the *yogin* without denying the legitimacy of the Vedic revelation. They could do it because the *śruti* itself (as in the case of the MU) already referred to it. Furthermore, they integrated the *yogin*’s path into the picture but regarded it as ancillary to the *ṛṣi*’s path. In particular, the VP shows a significant hermeneutical strategy to accommodate the kind of omniscience rooted in yogic practices with the Vedic tradition: by studying *vyākaraṇa* (hence by practicing some form of austerity) one can legitimately aspire to know the Veda and through it gain intuitional knowledge of the ultimate reality. This stance implies a total conflation of the knowledge of the omniscient being and the content of the Veda: one becomes omniscient only by knowing the all-pervading nature of language, and language is first and foremost the one embodied in the Veda.

To conclude, one can sketch a very basic chronology – obviously open to future integrations and revisions – of the way extraordinary capabilities were dealt with in early Brahmanism by isolating three main periods:

- 1) A first phase corresponding to the earliest Vedic sources, in which extraordinary cognitions are not discussed at all, even if a certain intuitive knowledge appears to be granted to the figure of the seer.
- 2) A second phase, coinciding with the Epic period and the spread of the idea of karmic retribution, where the figure of the *ṛṣi* and that of the *yogin* often appear side by side and start to be explicitly associated with extraordinary abilities of cognition. Most sources show no significant distinction between the two, others, in particular the MU, seem to envisage some differentiation that will be fleshed out in a later period.
- 3) A third phase in which Brahmanical speculation, probably under external influence, starts to deal with the issue and recurs to different solutions to cope with it. This was accomplished either by neatly refuting extraordinary cognitions, as in the case of the Mīmāṃsā, or by accepting them but as firmly anchored to the framework of the Vedic values, as in the case of Bhartṛhari and Praśastapāda.

Acknowledgments

This article was written thanks to the generous support of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) and is the partial outcome of the project “Language and Action in Early Brahmanical Philosophy” (P 25287), carried out at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) in Vienna. I am extremely thankful to Vincent Eltschinger and Hugo David for having improved the draft with their precious suggestions and criticism. I am also grateful to Katharine Apostle for having refined the English of the original version. It goes without saying that any inaccuracies must be attributed to the author only.

Bibliography

Primary sources

[VP] Bhartṛhari. *Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari with the Vṛtti and the Paddhati of Vṛṣabhadeva*. Edited by Subramania Iyer. Pune: Deccan College. 1966.

Bhartṛhari. *Vākyapadīya (mūlakārikās), Bhartṛharis Vākyapadīya*. Ed. by W. Rau. Wiesbaden: Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 42. 1977.

Bhartṛhari. *The Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari. Kāṇḍa II. With the commentary of Puṇyārāja and the ancient Vṛtti*. Ed. by S. Iyer. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. 1983.

Dignāga. *Dignāga's Pramāṇasamuccaya. Chapter 1: Hypothetical reconstruction of the Sanskrit text with the help of the two translations on the basis of the hitherto known Sanskrit fragments and the linguistic materials gained from Jinendrabuddhi's Tīkā*. Ed. by E. Steinkellner. Wien. 2005.

[PV] Dharmakīrti. *Dharmakīrti's Pramāṇavārttika with a commentary by Manorathanandin*. Ed. by Rāhula Sāṃkṛtyāyana. *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*: 24/3-26/3. 1938.

Gautama. *Nyāyasūtra with Bhāṣya: Gautamīyanyāyadarśana with Bhāṣya of Vātsyāyana*. Ed. by A. Thakur. New Delhi. 1997.

[MBh] *Mahābhārata*. Critical Edition by V.S. Sukthankar, S.K. Bevalkar. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. 1933-1966.

[PDhS] *Nyāyakandalī*. Ed. By J.S. Jetly, V.G. Parikh. Varodara: Oriental Institute

[RV] *Ṛgveda: Rig-Veda Samhita, the sacred hymns of the Brahmins: together with the commentary of Sayanacharya* (6 vols.). Ed. by F.M. Müller. London. 1849-1874.

Śatapathabrāhmaṇa: The Śatapathabrāhmaṇa in the Mādhyandina Śākhā with extracts from the commentaries of Śayaṇa, Harisvāmin and Dvivedagaṅga. Ed by A. Weber. Berlin-London. 1855.

Upaniṣads: ten principal Upaniṣads with Śāṅkarabhāṣya. Delhi. 1964.

Yāska. *Nirukta: the Nighaṇṭu and the Nirukta: the oldest Indian treatise on etymology, philology and semantics.* Ed. by Lakhsman Swarup. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. 1967.

[YS] *Yogasūtra. Yoga philosophy of Patañjali containing his Yoga aphorisms with the commentary of Vyāsa in the original Sanskrit and annotation thereon with copious Hints on the practice of Yoga.* Ed. by Swāmi Āraṇya Hariharānanda. Calcutta. 1981.

Secondary sources

Aklujkar, A. (2009). “Veda revelation according to Bhartṛhari” in Chaturvedi, M. (ed.), *Bhartṛhari: language, thought and reality. Proceedings of the international seminar.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. 1-97.

Bronkhorst, J. (1995). “Grammar as the door to liberation”. *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 76: 97-106.

———. (1998). *The two sources of Indian asceticism.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

———. (2007). *Greater Magadha. Studies in the culture of early India.* Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Bühnemann, G. (1980). *Der Allwissende Buddha. Ein Beweis und seine Probleme. Ratnakīrti's Sarvajñasiddhi.* Wien: Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde 4.

Deshpande, M. (1994). “The changing notion of śiṣṭa from Patañjali to Bhartṛhari” in Bhate, S.– Bronkhorst, J. (eds.), *Bhartṛhari, philosopher and grammarian: Proceedings of the first international conference on Bhartṛhari.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. 95-115.

Dunne, J. (2006). “Realizing the unreal: Dharmakīrti's theory of yogic perception”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34: 497-519.

Eggeling J. (1882). *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa according to the text of Mādhyandina school.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Eltschinger, V. (2009). "On the career and the cognition of *Yogins*" in Franco, E. (ed.), *Yogic perception, meditation and altered states of consciousness*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. 169-213.
- Eltschinger, V. (2014). "The four nobles' truths and their 16 aspects: on the dogmatic and soteriological presuppositions of the Buddhist epistemologists' Views on *Niścaya*". *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 42:2-3: 249-273.
- Falk, H. (1996). *Goodies for India. Literary, orality and Vedic culture* in Raible, W. (ed.), *Erscheinungsformen Kultureller Prozesse*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag. 103-120.
- Ferrante, M. (2013). "Vṛṣabhadeva's *Sphuṭākṣarā* on Bhartṛhari's metaphysics: commentarial strategy and new interpretations". *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 41.2: 133-149.
- . (2014). "How to obtain salvation through language? Bhartṛhari on *śabdapūrvayoga*" in Keidan, A. (ed.), *The Study of Asia between Antiquity and Modernity: Parallels and Comparisons*. Supplemento 2 alla Rivista degli Studi Orientali. 161-176.
- . (forth.). "Bhartṛhari and verbal testimony: a 'hyper-antireductionist' approach?" *Proceedings of the 4th Coffee Break Conference*.
- Feuerstein, G. (1996). *The philosophy of classical Yoga*. Rochester: Inner Tradition International.
- Frauwallner, E. (1961). "Landmarks in the history of Indian logic". *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd-und Ostasiens* 5:125-148.
- Gellman, J. (2014). "Mysticism". *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/mysticism/>.
- Gonda, J. (1963). *The vision of the Vedic poets*. The Hague: Mouton & co.
- Hiltebeitel, A. (2001). *Rethinking the Mahabharata: a reader's guide to the education of the dharma king*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Isaacson, H. (1993). "Yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*) in early Vaiśeṣika". *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 18: 139-160.
- Iyer, S. (1964). "Bhartṛhari on *vyākaraṇa* as a means of attaining *mokṣa*". *Adyar Library Bulletin* 28: 112-131.
- Jacobsen, K. A. (2011). "Yoga powers and religious tradition" in Jacobsen, K. A. (ed.), *Yoga powers: extraordinary capacities attained through meditation and concentration*. Leiden: Brill. 1-31.

- Jaini, P. S. (1974). “On the sarvajñatva (omniscience) of Mahāvīra and the Buddha” in Cousins, L. – Kunst, A. – Norman, K.R. (eds.), *Buddhist studies in honour of I.B. Horner*. Dordrecht: D.Reidel Publishing Company. 71-90.
- Jamison, S.-Brereton, J. (2014). *The Rigveda. The earliest religious poetry of India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kahrs, E. (1998). *Indian semantic analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kataoka, K. (2011). *Kumārila on truth, omniscience and killing. Part 1: A critical edition of Mīmāṃsā-Ślokavārttika ad 1.1.2 (Codanasūtra). Part 2: An Annotated Translation of Mimamsa-Slokavārttika ad 1.1.2 (Codanasūtra)*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Krasser, H. (2011). “Bhāviveka, Dharmakīrti and Kumārila” in Funayama, T. (ed.), *Chūgoku-Indo syūkyō-shi tokuni bukkyōushi ni okeru syomotsu no ryūtsū-denpa to jinbutsu-idō no chiiki- tokusei* 中国印度宗教史とくに仏教史における書物の流通伝播と人物移動の地域 特性 [Regional characteristics of text dissemination and relocation of people in the history of Chinese and Indian religions, with special reference to Buddhism]. 193-242.
- Larson, G.K.–Bhattacharya, R.S. (2008). *Yoga: India's philosophy of meditation*. Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophy, vol. XII. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Leggett, T. (1990). *The complete commentary by Śāṅkara on the Yogasūtras*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International.
- Lyssenko, V. (1998). “La connaissance suprarationnelle chez Praśastapāda”. *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatique* 52.1: 85-116.
- MacDonald, A. (2009). “Knowing nothing: Candrakīrti and yogic perception” in Franco, E. (ed.), *Yogic perception, meditation and altered states of consciousness*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. 133-168.
- Malinar, A. (2011). “Yoga powers in the Mahābhārata” in Jacobsen, K. A. (ed.), *Yoga powers: extraordinary capacities attained through meditation and concentration*. Leiden: Brill. 33-60.
- Mallinson, J. (2011). “Siddhi and mahāsiddhi in early haṭhayoga” in Jacobsen, K. A. (ed.), *Yoga powers: extraordinary capacities attained through meditation and concentration*. Leiden: Brill. 327-344.
- McClintock, S. (2000). “Knowing all through knowing one: mystical communion or logical trick in the *Tattvasaṃgraha* and *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā*”. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 23.2: 225-244.

- (2010). *Omniscience and the rhetoric of reason*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- McCrea, L. (2009). “Just like us, just like now: the tactical implications of the Mīmāṃsā rejection of yogic perception” in Franco, E. (ed.), *Yogic perception, meditation and altered states of consciousness*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. 55-70.
- Mitchiner, J.E. (2000). *Traditions of the seven ṛṣis*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Moriyama, S. (2014). *Omniscience and religious authority. A study on Prajñākaragupta’s Pramāṇavārttikālaṅkārabhāṣya ad Pramāṇavārttika II 8-10 and 29-33*. Zurich: Lit Verlag.
- Neelis, J. (2008). “Review of Greater Magadha”. *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 18.3: 381-383.
- Olivelle, P. (1998). *Upaniṣad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pemwieser, M. (1991). *Materialen zur Theorie der Yogischen Erkenntnis im Buddhismus*. Universität Wien. Unpublished MA Thesis.
- Samuel, G. (2008). *The origins of Yoga and Tantra*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sarbacker, S.R. (2011). “Power and meaning in the Yogasūtra of Patañjali” in Jacobsen, K. A. (ed.), *Yoga powers: extraordinary capacities attained through meditation and concentration*. Leiden: Brill. 195-222.
- Taber, J. (2009). “Yoga and our epistemic predicament” in Franco, E. (ed.), *Yogic perception, meditation and altered states of consciousness*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. 71-92.
- Torella, R. (2012). “Observation on yogipratyakṣa” in Watanabe, C.–Desmarais, M.–Honda, Y. (eds.) (2012), *Samskṛta-sādhutā. Goodness of Sanskrit. Studies in Honour of Professor Ashok Aklujkar*. Delhi: Printworld. 470-487.
- Wezler, A. (2001). “Some remarks on Nirukta 1.20 *sākṣātkṛtadharmāṇarṣayo*, etc.” in Michaels, A. (ed.), *The pandit. Traditional scholarship in India*. Delhi: Manohar. 215-249.
- Witzler, J. (2009). “Ṛṣis” in Jacobsen, K. A. et al. (eds.), *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Volume I. Regions, pilgrimage, deities*. Leiden-Boston: Brill. 703-709.
- Woo, J. (2005). “Kamalaśīla on yogipratyakṣa”. *Indo-Iranian Journal* 48: 111-121.
- (2007). “Yogipratyakṣa in Vācaspati Miśra’s Nyāyakaṇikā” in Franco, E. – Preisendanz, K. (eds.), *Expanding and merging horizons: contributions to South Asian and cross-cultural studies in commemoration of Wilhelm Halbfass*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. 347-353.

——— (2009). “Gradual and sudden enlightenment: The attainment of *yogipratyakṣa* in the later Yogācāra school”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37: 179-188.

Wynne, A. (2011). “Review of Bronkhorst, Johannes, *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India*”. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. July, 2011.