



Logic and language in Indian religions

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Abstract

This article concentrates on certain beliefs that many Indian thinkers implicitly accepted and that show up in an analysis of reasoned arguments they presented. These beliefs concerned the relationship between language and reality. For Brahmanical thinkers, who owed their privileged position in society in great part to their mastery of texts — the Veda — that were deemed to be directly connected to reality, this relationship between language and reality was a matter of course. For reasons of their own, Buddhist thinkers had come to think that the world of our experience is largely determined by language. This shared belief, which most often though not always remained implicit, found its way into certain arguments. These arguments remain unintelligible without an awareness of the underlying belief.

Keywords logic · language · Brahmanism · Buddhism · Jainism

The most serious mistake a modern reader can make is to assume that Indian philosophers were just like modern philosophers, the main difference being that they lived many centuries ago, in India, and expressed themselves in different languages, mainly Sanskrit. This would be overlooking the fact that most human activities, including philosophizing, are profoundly embedded in the beliefs, presuppositions and expectations that characterize the culture and the period in which they live. The French historian Lucien FEBVRE used in this connection the expression *outillage mental*, ‘mental equipment’, different for people living in different ages. Atheism in the modern sense of the term, FEBVRE points out in his book *Le problème de*

This paper brings together observations that are discussed in more detail elsewhere, most importantly BRONKHORST 2011 and BRONKHORST 2016: §§ IIA.4 and III.4.

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l'incroyance au XVIe siècle, was simply unthinkable in sixteenth century Europe: people did not have the mental equipment to conceive of it.

Quite independently of the question whether FEBVRE's claim is correct in its full generality, this example should discourage us from entering too easily into a discussion with Indian thinkers on our terms. Like the Europeans of the sixteenth century, they too had many beliefs, presuppositions and expectations of which they were perhaps not or only partially aware, and for them too there may have been ideas they could not conceive of. More precisely perhaps, they might have understood those new ideas if someone had presented these to them, but since this did not happen, these ideas never crossed their minds.

FEBVRE's observation concerns a belief that seemed essential to thinkers of sixteenth century Europe: the existence of (a) God. Thinkers of classical India were less convinced that there is only one possible position on this particular issue; many of them felt quite comfortable with the idea of a world without creator God (as were thinkers of the European Ancient World; WHITMARSH 2016). Among their presuppositions we rather find the deep conviction that language and reality are deeply intertwined. Language is for them rarely, if ever, a marginal philosophical issue. Quite the contrary, more often than not, ideas about language are the very basis of their philosophies. I will give some examples of this later on.

This takes us back to the relation between classical Indian and modern philosophers, and to the rather obvious observation that a discussion with a philosopher who lived many centuries ago is bound to be a one-sided affair. The ancient philosopher may have had all the intelligence needed to come to terms with ideas that a modern philosopher might propose to him, but alas, he is dead. The modern scholar who studies those ancient thinkers is in a more advantageous position: he can learn to understand the ancient thinkers on their own terms, if only he is open to it and willing to make the effort.

Because of the conviction that language and reality (phenomenal reality in the case of the Buddhists; see below) are deeply intertwined, philosophy in India was not carried out by philosophers who had no prior concern with language. Most of the participants belonged to either of two groups: Brahmins or Buddhists. (The Jainas played a relatively minor and sometimes intermediary role.) Neither Brahmins nor Buddhists were unbiased observers where language was concerned. Both approached this field with strong, though different, convictions.

Consider first the Brahmins. In their own self-understanding, these men (women were not expected to recite the Veda) owed their Brahmanical status to the fact that they knew part of the Veda by heart and recited these parts at appropriate occasions. The Veda is a corpus of texts, portions of which were meant to be recited at ritual occasions. This recitation was, and to some extent still is, believed to contribute to the efficacy of the ritual concerned. In other words, Brahmins were of the opinion that they were in the possession of verbal utterances that had an effect on the world. At first sight this is not particularly surprising. All language users utter words and sentences with the expectation that this may have an effect in the world. But for most language users, this effect comes about through the intermediary of those who hear and understand their words and sentences. We can order or request others to do some-

thing, or influence others to act and behave in accordance with our wishes by means of other verbal messages.

This was not the way Brahmins believed their sacred formulas affected the world. Sacred formulas, called *mantras* in the Indian context, were believed to affect the world without the intermediary of other beings, whether human or non-human. *Mantras* affect the world directly, on condition that they are correctly pronounced (in the right circumstances, of course). This efficacy of the *mantras* is at least in part due to their language. This language is the one that came to be called Sanskrit, but which early Brahmanical users and thinkers merely considered the correct use of words. Underlying the Brahmins' ritual activity is the conviction that Sanskrit can have a direct effect on the world, this because Sanskrit is related to reality in ways other languages ('incorrect use of words') are not. Brahmanical myths even explain that the world has been created in accordance with the words of the Veda.

The Veda, then, is a corpus of texts containing *mantras* that have an effect on the world without the intermediary of a hearer. For many Brahmins, the Vedic *mantras*, and more generally the whole Veda, have no initial speaker either. The Veda has no author, and is therefore pure, self-existent speech. Having no author implies that it has no beginning in time. The Veda is therefore beginningless, eternal speech. Being pure speech, not soiled by the interference of an author (who may conceivably be ill-informed, or ill-intentioned), the statements and injunctions of the Veda cannot but be reliable, if only we can interpret them objectively. This belief is behind the need felt to develop a method to find an objective interpretation of the Veda. Reflections about the interpretation of Sanskrit sentences in general did not lag behind, and continued until recent times.

Let us return for a moment to the centrality of Sanskrit in Brahmanical linguistic thought. This belief is so fundamental that it is easily overlooked in modern scholarship. It influenced all Brahmanical thought about language, and about much else. As a matter of fact, languages other than Sanskrit were rarely, if ever, taken into consideration by Brahmanical thinkers. Their linguistic thought concerned a privileged language, from their point of view the only correct language, the only language also that has a natural and intimate link with reality. One exaggerates but little when stating that much of Brahmanical thought is an enquiry into the consequences of this belief.

Unlike Brahmanism, Buddhism did not start out with any identifiable implicit or explicit convictions about language. The message of the Buddha was spread in local languages, being adjusted or translated where necessary. Language did come to play an important role in Buddhist thought, but not until a few centuries after the death of the Buddha, and initially in a region far removed from the region where he had preached. Gandhāra, a region in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent (in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan), witnessed a thorough rethinking of Buddhist teaching. The philosophy here created saw the world as essentially atomic and momentary in nature, as being constituted of ultimate momentary constituents called *dharmas*. It went one step further, and looked upon these *dharmas* as the only really existing things. Things made up of *dharmas* — which includes all things we are acquainted with, such as chariots, houses, etc. —, not being *dharmas* themselves, did not really exist.

So far language plays no role in the philosophical vision elaborated by the Buddhist scholiasts of north-western India. It does play a role in explaining that we believe we live in a world of chariots, houses and much else that does not really exist. All these ultimately non-existing ‘things’ are nothing but words. Stated differently, we are tricked by language into thinking that we live in a world populated by objects that do not really exist.

The Buddhist philosophy of north-western India spread in subsequent centuries all over the subcontinent and beyond, and underwent many developments. However, the conviction that we live in an unreal world, and that this unreal world has a close link with language, remained a characteristic of Buddhist thought. In fact, subsequent Buddhist thinkers made the further claim that not even *dharmas* exist. Clearly this left them in an ultimately non-existing world, and a world of ordinary experience created by language.

It follows from the above that Brahmanical and Buddhist thinkers, though starting from altogether different positions and without influencing each other during the early period, arrived at very similar conclusions. Both now believed that there was an intimate link between the world of our experience and language. Both accepted, each in their own way, that our common-sense world has been created by language.

There were important differences, of course. Brahmanical thinkers thought that language was close to the *real* world; Buddhists thought that it was close to the ultimately *unreal*, imaginary, world of our experience. Brahmins did not talk about language in general, but only about Sanskrit, for them the only real language; Buddhist thinkers did not privilege one language, at least not initially.

Brahmanical and Buddhist thinkers came to interact in subsequent centuries. This led to a refinement of their positions, and sometimes to large-scale borrowing. The Buddhist notion of the unreality of our common-sense world did not initially agree with Brahmanical conceptions of the world. However, roughly from the middle of the first millennium CE onward this notion found favour with at least some Brahmanical thinkers, who adjusted it to their needs. In doing so, they also reserved a place for language (the Sanskrit language, of course), which had to play a role, here too, to explain our common-sense world.

The conviction that language and reality are closely connected profoundly influenced the philosophies that Brahmanism and Buddhism developed over time. It also had an effect on the kind of arguments they considered coherent.

I will consider two kinds of arguments. In one of these, the premise is that something exists because there is a word for it. This kind of argument might convince Brahmins, but would not convince Buddhists, for reasons that I explained earlier: Brahmanism took the close connection between words and really existing things for granted, whereas Buddhism looked upon things designated by words as not really existing. The second kind of argument is slightly more subtle. It is based on the claim that statements refer to situations constituted of the things designated by the words of that statement. This kind of argument became central to all schools of Indian philosophy: Brahmanical, Buddhist and also Jaina.

Let us look at the first kind of argument in some detail. In its crudest form it claims that something for which there is a word must therefore exist. In English it might take some such form as: “angels exist because the word *angel* is there”, “Martians

exist because there is the word *Martian*". In English such an argument would carry no weight, because words are arbitrary: we can create words for anything we imagine, existing or non-existing. However, this comparison with English reminds us to be careful not to impose our cultural prejudices on a different culture. The words of Sanskrit are not arbitrary (at least not for Brahmins) and it is not possible to create new words in this language. The Brahmanical position is that Sanskrit has been in existence from beginningless time and cannot be changed. The argument that something must exist because there is a word for it is not therefore as ridiculous as it looks at first sight.

A number of early classical Sanskrit works shows that this argument was indeed used by certain thinkers, usually in discussions that involve words such as 'heaven' and 'deity', words that refer to entities that cannot be observed. Early Indian thinkers, most of them apparently belonging to the school of Vedic Interpretation (*Mīmāṃsā*), accepted that the very existence of these words guaranteed that the objects denoted — heaven and deities respectively — exist.

Interestingly, this argument came to be rejected by subsequent thinkers. We see this happening in a text from the middle of the first millennium, Śabara's *Commentary of Vedic Interpretation (Mīmāṃsā-bhāṣya)*. Far from maintaining that the existence of heaven and of deities is vouchsafed by the words that designate them, Śabara comes close to denying that they exist at all. The reason for this rejection lies in Śabara's critical attitude toward temple priests, and the worship of gods they orchestrated. His criticism takes the form of a denial of the very existence of the deities that the temple priests are supposed to serve. This, however, was only possible by way of abandoning a belief that had been part of Vedic Interpretation, namely, that words have to correspond to existing things.

In spite of this rejection, this kind of argument leaves its traces in Brahmanical philosophical literature. An important school of philosophy, the Vaiśeṣika system, provides an elaborate ontology — an analysis of what exists — that is based on three categories (lit. "word-meanings") — substance, quality and motion — which reflect the three grammatical categories nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Admittedly, no Vaiśeṣika text argues for the existence of these categories by invoking this linguistic parallel, presumably because this parallel was too obvious for Brahmanical thinkers to need explicit mention. Explicit arguments based on linguistic parallelism do frequently occur in this school of thought. In enumerating all the things that exist, it regularly says that this or that thing exists and acts like this or like that, because language tells us so. For example, since it is common usage to say that a certain object is produced at this or that time, it follows that *time* is a substance that is the cause of the origin, preservation, and destruction of all produced things. The personal pronoun 'I', to give another example, indicates the existence of a soul (conceived of as a substance in Vaiśeṣika). The fact that this pronoun does not enter into apposition with the word 'earth', etc. (as in "I am earth"), proves that the soul is different from the body (which is, in the case of human beings, a form of earth). Pleasure is a quality of the soul, because we say: "I am pleased." The qualities 'distance' and 'nearness' are responsible for our use of the words 'distant' and 'near', respectively.

These are just a few selected examples of the way Brahmanical thinkers used their conviction of the close connection between words and things in some of their

arguments. As a matter of fact, Brahmanical philosophical texts from all periods frequently argue for one or another position by invoking the argument “because this is linguistic usage” (°*vyavahārāt*). An inadvertent reader from another culture may skip such a remark without paying attention, thus overlooking the importance that verbal expressions have for the thinkers he is studying.

It is time to turn to the second kind of argument I announced: arguments based on the conviction that statements refer to situations constituted of the things designated by the words of that statement. This is the conviction that I call *correspondence principle*. At first sight this principle seems reasonable enough. If I say “the cat sits on the mat”, I refer to a situation in which there is a cat, a mat and the activity of sitting. (Since Sanskrit uses no definite or indefinite articles, the question what happens to *the* does not arise. The preposition *on* is taken care of by the locative case.)

However, problems arise in statements that are about the production of something, or its coming into being. Consider “the potter makes a pot”. This statement refers to a situation in which there is a potter and the act of making. There is no pot as yet in this situation, for if there were one, the potter would not have to make it. Statements like this one were experienced as problematic. They also came to be used as arguments.

Consider the following lines:

If there existed anywhere something unarisen, it could arise. Since no such thing exists, what is it that arises?...

The production of something that exists already is not possible; the production of something that does not exist is not possible either; nor is there production of something that both exists and does not exist....

The destruction of an existing entity is not possible....

The destruction of a non-existing entity is not possible either,....

These lines are taken from a work by Nāgārjuna, a Buddhist thinker probably from the end of the second century CE (*Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* 7.17; 7.20; 7.30ab; 7.31). To understand them, we must think of the potter who makes a pot. The statement implies (for those who accept the correspondence principle) that there is a pot in the situation referred to by “the potter makes a pot”. But since the pot is still to be made, it is a pot that does not yet exist. This is how Nāgārjuna can say: “If there existed anywhere something unarisen, it could arise. Since no such thing exists, what is it that arises?” The other lines make sense for similar reasons.

As I pointed out earlier, these at first sight contradictory observations are used as arguments. They are meant to show that the world of our experience does not exist, indeed cannot exist. It cannot exist because much of what we say about it is self-contradictory. But as long as one is not aware of the importance of the correspondence principle in Indian thought, these lines do not look like arguments but rather like gobbledygook. And even though these lines do not refer to language at all, the presupposition on which they are based have everything to do with language, for the correspondence principle is about the relationship between language and reality.

Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist. Like other Buddhists, he believed that the world of our experience is a creation of language, not ultimately real. The contradictions he brought to light did, in the end, only confirm the Buddhist world view. He was cer-

tainly recognized as an original thinker among his fellow Buddhists, but these fellow Buddhists did not have to completely refashion their world view under the weight of his arguments.

The situation was far less comfortable for the Brahmanical and Jaina thinkers. They, too, implicitly accepted the correspondence principle, so they, too, found a statement like “the potter makes a pot” problematic. More problematic than the Buddhists, for unlike the Buddhists, they did not deny the reality of the phenomenal world. What could they do?

Interestingly, since they could not abandon the correspondence principle, they used such problematic statements to prove visions of reality which they appear to have invented for the occasion. There is a Brahmanical school known by the name of Sāṃkhya. One of its classical texts is called *Verses on Sāṃkhya* (*Sāṃkhya-kārikā*) and contains the following line (no. 9):

The effect pre-exists in the cause, because one cannot make what does not exist,....

I hope you recognize the situation. The potter can only make a pot if the pot exists, “because one cannot make what does not exist”. And what does this prove? It proves that “the effect pre-exists in the cause”. In concrete terms this means: the pot exists already in the clay out of which it will be fashioned.

The doctrine of the pre-existing effect is called *sat-kārya-vāda* in Sanskrit. It became a cornerstone of the Sāṃkhya philosophy. It is not likely to convince many modern readers, but this is because the supporting argument is lost on those modern readers. Modern readers do not swear by the correspondence principle the way many Indian thinkers did. Those who do, whether implicitly or explicitly, will appreciate the argument much better: The potter can only make a pot if there is a pot. Where is that pot? In the clay from which it will be formed.

The *sat-kārya-vāda* was not limited to Sāṃkhya. The same position is taken in Śāṅkara’s *Commentary on the Brahma-sūtra* (*Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* on sūtra 2.1.18, p. 389), which justifies it with reference to the statement “the pot comes into being”:

If the effect did not exist prior to its coming into being, the coming into being would be without agent and empty. For coming into being is an activity, and must therefore have an agent, like activities such as going etc. It would be contradictory to say that something is an activity, but has no agent. It could be thought that the coming into being of a pot, though mentioned, would not have the pot as agent, but rather something else. ... If that were true, one would say “the potter and other causes come into being” instead of “the pot comes into being”. In the world however, when one says “the pot comes into being” no one understands that also the potter etc. come into being; for these are understood to have already come into being.

This passage, and the underlined sentence in particular, show the close link between *sat-kārya-vāda* and language in Śāṅkara’s mind, and rightly so.

Other Brahmanical thinkers were willing to use the apparent contradiction to draw even more daring conclusions. A text called Science of Tradition (*Āgama-śāstra*), which tradition ascribes, probably incorrectly, to an author called Gauḍapāda, uses it as an argument to show that nothing can come into being (*Āgama-śāstra* 4.3-5; 3.48 cd; 3.27-28):

In their debates with one another, some teachers maintain the arising of what exists; other intelligent ones maintain the arising of what does not exist. Nothing that exists can arise — what does not exist cannot arise either; arguing thus, followers of non-duality teach non-arising. We approve of the non-arising taught by them; we are not in contradiction with them. Listen to how there is no contradiction. Disputants claim the production of a thing that has not already been produced. How will something that has not been produced nor destroyed become destructible?

In ultimate truth, nothing arises.

The birth of something existent is possible through illusion, but not in reality. For someone who thinks that something arises in reality, it is an arisen thing that arises.

The birth of something non-existent is possible neither through illusion nor in reality. The son of a barren woman is born neither in truth nor through illusion.

The last authors we have considered were Brahmanical authors. Brahmanism, I pointed out earlier, distinguished themselves from Buddhism in that its thinkers, unlike the Buddhists, accepted the reality of the world of our experience. This observation now had to be modified. Certain Brahmanical thinkers, who in the course of time became numerous, came to accept that the world of our experience is not real after all. The idea that phenomenal reality is ultimately an illusion gained in importance and, in the long run, became predominant. One might think that Buddhist influence played a role here, and there may be a grain of truth in this. But as important, if not more so, was the felt strength of the argument based on the supposed contradictory nature of phenomenal reality. Analysis based on the correspondence principle shows that things cannot come into being, so apparently they do not come into being. An argument based on an implicit presupposition totally overturned the philosophical world view of many Brahmins.

There were, to be sure, Brahmanical schools of thought that resisted this development. They looked for, and found, arguments to maintain that ordinary reality is not just an illusion. We cannot consider their arguments at present. I do however invite you to briefly look at the way Jaina thinkers dealt with the problem. Jainism adopted the position according to which reality is manifold, a position called *an-ekānta-vāda*. The following passages from Jinabhadra's *Special Commentary on the Āvaśyaka Sūtra* (*Viśeṣāvaśyaka-bhāṣya* vol. II, p. 378 [under verse 2149] and p. 385 [on verses 2183-84]; 6th century CE) explain what is at stake. The first of these two passages gives voice to an opponent:

What has been produced is not being produced, because it is already there, like a pot. But if you accept that what has been produced, too, is being produced, you will have infinite regress. What has not been produced is not being produced either, because it is not there, like the horn of a donkey. And if you accept that what has not been produced, too, is being produced, you will have to accept that non-entities, such as the horn of a donkey etc., can be produced. That which has been both produced *and* not produced is not produced either, because the problems bound up with both positions would accrue.

This position is subsequently criticized. The following passage clarifies Jinabhadra's position:

In this world there are things that are being produced having been produced already, others are being produced not having been produced already, others are being produced having been produced and not having been produced, others again are being produced while being produced, and some are not being produced at all, according to what one wishes to express. ... For example, a pot is being produced having been produced in the form of clay etc., because it is made of that. That same pot is being produced not having been produced concerning its particular shape, because that was not there before. The pot is produced having been produced *and* not produced at the same time with respect to its colour, etc., and its specific form, because it is not different from these things. It is produced while being produced because an action can take place only in the present moment, given that a real action is not possible by reason of the fact that the past has vanished and the future is not yet present.

The beginning of this passage gives expression to *an-ekānta-vāda* in at least one of its usual forms: "there are things that are produced having already been produced, and others that are produced not having been produced; there are those that are produced having been produced *and* not produced at the same time, and still others that are produced while being produced". Reality is manifold, and this solves the problem of the potter and his pot.

The humble village potter may not have been aware to what extent his activity shook Indian philosophy in its foundations. The argument it gave rise to was unanswerable to many Indian thinkers unless they thoroughly revised their ontology. This is what they did, and the result is well-known: for many nowadays, Indian philosophy is synonymous with the rejection of ordinary reality as illusory. It was not always like that, and not all are disturbed by it. The Indian village potter continues to ply his trade, whatever philosophers may say about it. Perhaps he is saved by the fact that he does not take the relationship between language and reality as seriously as those philosophers did.

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