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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOGIC AND LANGUAGE IN THE  
CONTEXT OF INDIAN RELIGION**

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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 ignoring the fact that most human endeavours, including philosophy, are intricately entwined with the values, assumptions, and norms that define the society and time in which they are performed. The French historian Lucien FEBVRE used in this connection the expression *outillage mental*, ‘mental equipment’, different for people living in different ages. According to FEBVRE in his book *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle*, atheism in the contemporary sense was simply unimaginable in sixteenth-century Europe since individuals lacked the mental capacity to do so.

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). Their underlying assumptions include a strong belief that language and reality are intricately entwined. They rarely, if ever, consider language to be a minor philosophical issue. On the contrary, their theories are frequently based on concepts related to language. Later on, I’ll provide some examples of this.

This brings up the relationship between ancient Indian philosophers and contemporary thinkers, as well as the very apparent conclusion that any conversation with a thinker who lived many centuries ago will inevitably be one-sided. The old philosopher might have had all the knowledge necessary to understand concepts that a modern philosopher would put forth to him, but unfortunately, he is no longer with us. 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

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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.

First, think about the Brahmins. These men believed that their Brahmanical status came from knowing portions of the Veda by heart and recitation these portions at the proper times (women were not expected to recite the Veda). The Veda is a collection of texts, some of which were written with the intention of being repeated during ritual events. This recital was, and to some extent still is, thought to increase the effectiveness of the ritual in question. In other words, Brahmins believed they had the ability to make statements that had an impact on the outside world. This does not seem very shocking at first. Every person who speaks a language does so with the hope that their words and sentences will have an impact on the outside world. However, for the majority of language users, this effect is brought about by people who hear and comprehend their words and sentences. We can direct or ask others to perform some-item, or use other language cues to persuade people to act and behave in accordance with our desired outcomes.

This was not how *Brahmins* perceived the effects of their sacred formulas on 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. Early *Brahmanical* users and thinkers only cared about word usage in this language, which later became known as Sanskrit. The belief that Sanskrit may directly affect the universe underlies the ritualistic behavior of the *Brahmins*. This is because Sanskrit is tied to reality in a way that other languages (those with "incorrect use of words") are not. Even in Hindu mythology, the world is said to have been formed in accordance with the *Vedic* text.

Consequently, the *Veda* is a collection of texts that contain *mantras* that have an impact on the world without the help of a hearer. The *Vedic mantras* and, more broadly, the entirety of the *Veda*, have no starting speaker for many *Brahmins* as well. The *Veda* is pure, self-existent speech since it lacks an author. It suggests that it has no beginning in time if

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there is no author. 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 idea underlies the feeling that a technique for determining an impartial *Vedic* interpretation should be developed. Reflections on the understanding of Sanskrit phrases as a whole followed suit and persisted up until the present.

Let's briefly revisit the significance of Sanskrit in Brahmanical linguistic theory. This conviction is so essential that it is frequently disregarded in contemporary scholarship. It has an impact on all Brahmanical language and other philosophical thinking. In reality, Brahmanical intellectuals seldom ever, if at all, considered other languages outside Sanskrit. Their conception of language focused on a privileged language that, in their perspective, is the only one that is correct and has a close, organic relationship to reality. It is not overstated to say that a large portion of Brahmanical philosophy is an investigation of the repercussions of this notion.

Buddhism did not begin with any discernible implicit or explicit convictions regarding language, in contrast to Brahmanism. The Buddha's teachings were disseminated in local tongues, when necessary being altered or translated. Although it didn't happen until several centuries after the Buddha's passing and at first in an area far from the one where he had preached, language did start to play a significant role in Buddhist thought. Gandhāra, a region in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent (in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan), witnessed a thorough rethinking of Buddhist teaching. The resulting philosophy held that the world was fundamentally transitory and atomic in character, made up of ultimate momentary elements known as dharmas. It even went so far as to consider these dharmas to be the only truly existing things. All of the objects we are familiar with, such as chariots, houses, etc., are made up of dharmas, but as they are not dharmas themselves, they do not actually exist. As of now, language has no significance in the philosophical perspective developed by the north-western Indian Buddhist philosophers. It does contribute to the explanation of why we think we live in a world with chariots, houses, and a lot of other things that don't actually exist. All of these supposedly real "things" are actually only words. Or, to put it another way, language deceives us into believing that we inhabit a universe filled with things that are not actually real.

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In the centuries that followed, the Buddhist thought of northwest India spread throughout the continent and beyond and experienced several developments. Buddhist thinking has continued to be characterized by the notion that language is a crucial component of the unreal reality in which we live. In fact, later Buddhist thinkers went so far as to assert that even the dharmas are nonexistent. They were now left in an obviously nonexistent universe that was also a world of commonplace experiences brought about by language.

In later years, Brahmanical and Buddhist intellectuals started to communicate. This caused them to improve their positions and occasionally borrow heavily. The Buddhist view that our everyday world is illusory did not previously accord with Brahmanical worldviews. However, this idea gained favour with at least some Brahmanical philosophers about the middle of the first millennium CE forward, who modified it to suit their requirements. In doing so, they also made room for language (the Sanskrit language, of course), which had to be involved in order to understand our everyday reality.

The philosophies of Brahmanism and Buddhism evolved over time under the profound influence of the notion that language and reality are intimately related. It also affected the types of arguments they found convincing.

I'll look at two different types of arguments. One of them makes the assumption that something exists just because a term exists to describe it. Brahmins might be persuaded by this line of reasoning, but Buddhists would not be, for the reasons I already stated: While Buddhism viewed things identified by words as not actually existing, Brahmanism took for granted the strong relationship between words and truly existing things. The second type of defense is a little more nuanced. It is predicated on the assertion that statements refer to circumstances made up of the things they name. This type of argument became fundamental to all Indian philosophical schools, including Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina.

Let's take a closer look at the first category of arguments. It asserts that something for which there is a word must consequently exist in its most basic form. In English it might take some such form as: "angels exist because the word *angel* is there", "Martia exists because the word *Martian* exists." 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. But this contrast with English serves as a warning against imposing our cultural

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preconceptions on people from other cultures. Sanskrit words are not arbitrary (at least not for Brahmins), and new terms cannot be added to the language. According to the Brahmanical perspective, Sanskrit has existed since the beginning of time and cannot be altered. Therefore, the argument that something must exist because there is a word for it is not as absurd as it may seem.

This argument was in fact utilized by some thinkers, as evidenced by a number of early classical Sanskrit texts, typically in arguments involving words like "heaven" and "deity," words that relate to intangible, unobservable entities. Early Indian thinkers, most of them apparently belonging to the school of Vedic Interpretation (*Mīmāṃsā*), recognized that the very fact that these words existed ensured the existence of the things they stood for, heaven and deities, respectively.

It's interesting to note that later thinkers eventually rejected this claim. 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. He criticizes the deities that temple priests are supposed to serve by denying their basic existence. The concept that words must correspond to things that already exist, which was an element of Vedic Interpretation, had to be disregarded in order for this to be viable.

Despite being rejected, this line of reasoning can still be found in some Brahmanical philosophical writings. 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. In this school of thought, explicit arguments based on linguistic parallelism are common. It frequently states that some things exist and behave in certain ways since language has told us so while listing all the things that are known to exist. It follows that time is a substance that is the source of the genesis, preservation, and annihilation of all manufactured objects because it is standard usage to say that a specific object was produced at a certain time. The personal

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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 only a few examples of how Brahmanical thinkers incorporated their belief in the intimate relationship between words and things into 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's time to move on to the second category of arguments I mentioned: those based on the conviction that a statement refers to a situation that is made up of the items it names. This is my guiding principle when it comes to writing. This principle looks reasonable enough at first glance. 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, when a statement refers to the creation of something or its emergence, issues can arise. 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 unrisen, it could arise. Since no such thing exists, what  
is it that arises?...

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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 unrisen, it could arise. Since no such thing exists, what is it that arises?” “The other lines make sense for similar reasons.

These initially incongruous observations are employed as arguments, as I already stated. They are intended to demonstrate that the world of our experience is not real and cannot be real. Because so much of what we say about it contradicts itself, it cannot exist. However, if one is unaware of the significance of the correspondence principle in Indian thought, these sentences appear to be nonsense rather than arguments. Moreover, despite the fact that these lines have nothing to do with language, the premise on which they are based is directly related to language because the correspondence principle is concerned with the connection 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. In the end, the inconsistencies he exposed served merely to support the Buddhist worldview. His fellow Buddhists undoubtedly acknowledged him as an original thinker, but they were not forced to fundamentally alter their worldview by the force of his arguments.

The Brahmanical and Jaina thinkers found their circumstances to be far less agreeable. 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

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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,....

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 plain English, this indicates that the pot already existing in the clay from which it will be made.

The doctrine of the pre-existing effect is called *sat-kārya-vāda* in Sanskrit. It became a cornerstone of the Sāṃkhya philosophy. Many modern readers are not likely to be persuaded by it, but this is because they do not understand the supporting evidence. The correspondence concept is not as revered by modern readers as it was by many Indian intellectuals. Those that do will find the argument much more compelling, whether tacitly or explicitly: Only when there is already a pot can the potter create one. That pot is not there. In the clay that will be used to create it. The *sat-kārya-vāda* was not limited to Sāṃkhya. The same position is taken in Śaṅkara'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”:

The coming into existence would be empty and without agency if the effect didn't already exist before it happened. Because coming into being is an activity, it requires an agent just like other activities like going, etc. To suggest that something is an activity but has no agent would be paradoxical. 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.

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This passage, and the underlined sentence in particular, show the close link between *sat-kāryavāda* and language in Śaṅkara's mind, and rightly so.

The apparent conflict was used by other Brahmanical theorists to support even riskier predictions. 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 most recent authors we looked at were Brahmanical authors. As I mentioned earlier, Brahmanism set itself apart from Buddhism in that its intellectuals, in contrast to the Buddhists, recognised the reality of the universe as we know it. This observation needed to be changed at this point. Some Brahmanical thinkers, who through time multiplied, came to believe that the reality we experience is actually not real. The thesis that phenomenal reality is essentially an illusion grew in significance and eventually took over. There may be some validity to the idea that Buddhist influences were at play in this situation. However, the perceived force of the argument based on the purportedly contradictory nature of phenomenal reality was just as significant, if not more so. According to analysis based on the correspondence principle, things cannot come into being, so it appears that they do not.

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Many Brahmins had their philosophical worldview completely overturned by an argument based on an implicit presupposition.

Undoubtedly, there were schools of thought associated with the Brahmins that opposed this advancement. They searched for and discovered justifications to support the idea that everyday reality is more than an illusion. We can't yet take into account their arguments. 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 give voice to an opponent.

Because it already exists, like a pot, what has been produced does not need to be produced again. However, you will experience infinite regress if you acknowledge that what has been generated is also currently being produced. Because it is not there, like a donkey's horn, what has not been produced is also not being produced. You will also have to believe that non-entities, like the horn of a donkey, etc., can be formed if you accept that what has not been made is also being produced. Because of the issues associated with both views, nothing that has been produced and nothing that has not been produced is being produced either.

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.

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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 unassuming village potter might not have been aware of the extent to which his actions upended Indian thought. Many Indian intellectuals believed that the argument it gave rise to could not be answered until their ontology was completely altered. They followed through with this, and the outcome is well known: for many people in modern society, Indian philosophy is synonymous with the rejection of everyday reality as an illusion. Not everyone finds it upsetting, and it wasn't always this way. Whatever philosophers may think about it, the Indian village potter nonetheless practices his craft. The fact that he does not take the connection between language and reality as seriously as those philosophers does, perhaps, save him.

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