

# Reinterpreting ahamkra as a possible way of solving the riddle of Smkhya metaphysics

Autor(en): **Hulin, Michel**

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## REINTERPRETING *AHAṆKĀRA* AS A POSSIBLE WAY OF SOLVING THE RIDDLE OF SĀṆKHYA METAPHYSICS

Michel Hulin, Paris

Every time we try to understand a highly paradoxical system like Sāṁkhya, that is apparently teeming with obscurities and contradictions of all kinds, the temptation is great, almost irresistible, to ascribe its obvious inconsistencies to the external circumstances of its formation. Precisely in the case of Sāṁkhya we know all too well how intricate and even chaotic its “prehistory” may have been. Nevertheless, this type of purely historical explanation always runs the danger of reducing a doctrine like Sāṁkhya to a hopeless mixture of fundamentally heterogeneous elements. On the other hand, a strictly philosophical interpretation runs the opposite danger of dogmatically and arbitrarily reading into the text the interpreter’s own views. However, there is perhaps a third way : that is first trying to exhaust every possibility of interpreting a system from inside, in terms of its own immanent logic, and only after that turning to the available historical data in order to somehow account for the remaining irreducible inconsistencies. That’s the way we are going to follow here while tackling the classical problem of the so-called ambiguity of the *tattva* in the Sāṁkhya system : are they, all things considered, psychological or cosmic in themselves ? Our approach is rather unorthodox and may even appear exceedingly speculative at places, but it’s a tentative one, that has no claim whatsoever to achieve final certainty. What we would like to show is that classical Sāṁkhya is not for us necessarily “dead stuff”, a matter of mere scholarly knowledge, but that it still makes sense to draw some intellectual and spiritual inspiration from it.

In this context, we would like first to mention briefly the position upheld by Rodney J. PARROT (1986) in his article “The problem of Sāṁkhya tattvas”.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the *kārikā* 22 to 24 which describe the emergence first of *buddhi*, then of *ahaṁkāra* out of it, and finally of the immediate products of *ahaṁkāra*, he rightly points out the impossibility of interpreting those entities – “judgement” and “ego-feeling” either as personal or as cosmic. In the first case, that would lead to some sort of

1 *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 14, 1986, pp. 55-77.

subjective idealism, clearly incompatible with the Sāṃkhya conception of one Nature, common to all *puruṣa*. In the second case, we would have to assume some sort of cosmic – that is actually divine – understanding and ego-feeling encompassing the multitude of the individual ones. Now, this again appears incompatible with the so-called “Atheism” of classical Sāṃkhya (apart from the necessity, then, of adding two more *tattva* to the traditionnal list of 25).

PARROT’s own solution boils down to admit that from *kārikā* 22 onwards (up to *kārikā* 62) reality is no more being described as it is in itself but from the point of view of the bounded *puruṣa* who wrongly identifies himself with Nature and its evolutes. Only that false identification will give birth to the human, psychological, *buddhi* and *ahaṃkāra*: no genuine *tattva*, like their cosmic counterparts, but mere phenomena possessing only “experiential” reality. In this way, the otherwise blatant contradiction between the psychological and the cosmic aspects of these *tattva* is bound to completely vanish.

Now, the trouble with PARROT’s “solution”, on the one hand, is that such a shift of attitude from *kārikā* 22 onwards is just being read into the text, with no support either from the *kārikā* themselves or from their commentaries. On the other hand, it leads to the assumption of such strange entities as “cosmic knowing” for *buddhi* (not to counfound with any kind of “cosmic intellect” inasmuch there is still no person at that stage) and “cosmic I-maker” for *ahaṃkāra* the corresponding mental organs would appear, along with their own functions, only “later”, as the bound *puruṣa* start identifying themselves with those *tattva* in the way of “I am the *buddhi*” and – oddly enough – “I am the I-maker”. We would call this explaining “*obscurum per obscurius*”, or cutting the gordian knot instead of patiently undoing it

So, an attempt is being made here to steer some middle way between a purely philosophical and dogmatic interpretation and a purely historical one. In particular, we are going to suggest that that famous “ambiguity” should not be read away at every cost as it is deeply rooted, in fact, in the very foundations of the classical Sāṃkhya system.

First of all, we have to question that all too “natural” opposition between subjectivity and objectivity. It rests, of course, on the fundamental duality of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, so that our texts could in no way ignore or bypass it. However, the very context in which they introduce it sheds by itself some light on the scope and meaning of that duality within the

Sāṃkhya system. Actually, we never come across any *direct* justification of it. It is being rather tacitly presupposed as the foremost condition of possibility of both *bhukti* and *mukti*.<sup>2</sup> Here, indeed, the *puruṣa-prakṛti* polarity does not provide any real basis because experience, as well as its cessation, requires individual, sentient beings in a constant relationship with their surroundings through organs of perception and action. Now organs (*indriya*) – unlike mere instruments – can be conceived only as the private property of some individual, living being who unequivocally distinguishes between “myself” and “not myself”. Consequently, according to classical Sāṃkhya, such splitting up will take place not at the level of the *buddhi* – which is clearly working in co-operation with the *manas* and the other *indriya* – but at the level of *ahaṁkāra*. The *buddhi*, in spite of its being the first evolute of *prakṛti*, cannot really discharge its function before the appearance of *ahaṁkāra* because it has at this stage no external world at its disposal to connect the (moreover only potential) subject to. Only *ahaṁkāra* provides the basis for the subject-object relationship in so far as it gives birth (as *vaikṛta* / *bhūtādi*) to both the “subjective” and “objective” series (*manas-indriya* versus *tanmātra-mahābhūta*).<sup>3</sup> So, in a way, *ahaṁkāra* must precede *buddhi*.

The impossibility for *ahaṁkāra* to fit into the *buddhi-manas-indriya* sequence follows from *a priori* as well as from *a posteriori* arguments. On the one hand, an “intellect” makes sense only as belonging to some particular individual. Now, at the very first stage of creation, in which *buddhi* is supposed to come to light directly out of *prakṛti*, there is no room, in the frame of the system, for any kind of person, human or divine. On the other hand, a close examination of *abhimāna*, representing the specific function of *ahaṁkāra*, clearly shows its disparity from the specific functions of *manas* and *buddhi* (respectively *saṃkalpa* and *adhyavasāya*). On the basis of its etymology and of its use in common parlance *abhimāna* could be technically defined as an unduly extension (*abhi-*) of the I-notion to entities basically foreign to it and better designable as “that” (*tat*). At the psychological level it means something like “high opinion of oneself, self-conceit” (MONIER-WILLIAMS).

Now, *kārikā* 30 and its commentaries describe the way the three internal organs are co-operating to produce a reliable perceptual knowledge

2 See, for instance, k. 21.

3 See k. 24 : ... *tasmād dvividhaḥ pravartate sargaḥ* et k. 25.

of the external world as well as adequate answers to the various challenges that may arise from it. The function of *manas*, as an organ of perception, consists in bringing together – *saṃ-kalpa* – the various sense-data (visual, auditory and so on). As an organ of action, it co-ordinates (again *saṃ-kalpa*) the operations of the specialised *karmendriya* : speech, locomotion and so on. As for the *buddhi*, it may also be considered as an organ of both knowledge and action but at the highest level: mental apprehension, ascertainment, judgement, resolution. Now, it seems that there is no real room for *abhimāna* in its proper meaning within the frame of that construction. This is evident from the commentaries of both Vācaspati Miśra and Gauḍapāda<sup>4</sup> on that part of *kārikā* 30 which deals with the “successive” (*kramaśaś*) functioning of those organs. Vācaspati’s commentary runs as follows: “... in dim-light, a person has at first only a vague perception of a certain object; then fixing his mind (*manas*) intently he observes (*niścinoti*) that it is a robber with his drawn bow and arrow levelled at him, then follows the self-consciousness (*abhimanyate*) that ‘the robber is advancing against *me*’; and lastly follows the determination (*adhyavasyati*) to run away from the place”.<sup>5</sup> So here *abhimāna* (as represented by *abhimanyate*) is completely stripped of its usual pejorative connotation of “self-conceit”: the traveller is absolutely right in considering the robber as an immediate threat to his money and possibly to his very life! The same holds good for Vācaspati’s commentary on *kārikā* 36 which compares the forwarding of the sense-data to the *puruṣa* with the process of tax-collecting in ancient India for the benefit of the Royal Treasury.<sup>6</sup> Here are the senses equated to the heads of families, the *manas* to a “village officer” (*grāmādhyakṣa*), the *ahamkāra* to a “District Governor” (*viśayādhyakṣa*), the *buddhi* to the “Governor of the Country” (*sarvādhyakṣa*) and the *puruṣa* to the king. Here again *ahamkāra* fits gently into the sequence but at the cost of a complete loss of its original meaning : The “District Governor”, as a matter of fact, is satisfied with “taking personal cognisance” (*abhimatya*) of the collected taxes and transmitting them to the “Governor of the Country”!

That same awkwardness is still more perceptible in Gauḍapāda’s commentary on *kārikā* 30 : “Thus, a person going along a road perceives an

4 Unfortunately enough, the relevant passage of the *Yuktidīpikā* is missing.

5 *The Tattva-Kaumudī*, tr. Ganganath JHA, Poona Oriental Series 10, 1965, p. 106.

6 *The Tattva-Kaumudī*, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

object at a distance, and is in doubt whether it is a post or a man : he then sees some characteristic mark like a creeper entwining, or a bird perching over it and then in his mind (*manas*), full of doubt, arises the determining intellect (*buddhi*) that it is a post, and then the ego (*ahamkāra*) makes it certain that it is certainly a post” (*ataḥ ahamkāraś ca niścayārthaḥ sthānur eveti*).<sup>7</sup> Obviously, Gauḍapāda does not know what to do with *ahamkāra*. That’s why he takes it out of its “normal” place – between *manas* and *buddhi* – and reduces its role to a mere reiteration of the *buddhi*’s judgement.

So, *ahamkāra* does not seem to show any real utility in the field of perception and action. That leads us to suspect it of not being a genuine element of the psychomental structure of man, not even a *tattva* quite like others.<sup>8</sup> A possible clue to what *ahamkāra* may really stand for lies in *kārikā*, the only one to describe “from the inside” how liberation occurs in the wake of the crucial discrimination of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* : “Thus, from the study (or analysis) of the principles, the “knowledge” (or salvation-knowledge) arises, “I am not, nothing belongs to me. I do not exist”, and this knowledge is complete because free from error, pure and solitary” (*evam tattvābhyāsān nāsmi na me nāham ity aparīṣeṣam / aviparyayād viśuddham kevalam utpadyate jñānam //*).<sup>9</sup> It becomes evident, here, that a person may get access to the state of liberation only through the “implosion” of his *ahamkāra*. Once *ahamkāra* dissolves, as a direct result of discrimination, the whole “subtle body”, that is the central part of the *tattva*-structure, is bound to collapse (*nivartate*).<sup>10</sup> That would not be the

7 *The Sāṃkhyakārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa with the commentary of Gauḍapāda*, translated by T. G. MAINKAR, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oriental Book Agency, Poona, 1972, p. 89.

8 Admittedly, *ahamkāra* is considered everywhere in the texts of classical Sāṃkhya as immediately derived from *buddhi*. However, there are some stray indications that the Sāṃkhya thinkers themselves did not feel quite comfortable with such a sequence. In the *Yuktidīpikā* on k. 29, for instance, we come across a *pūrva-pakṣa* which states that *ahamkāra* should be mentioned first at that place. It leans on a “śāstra” (untraced) which reads : “What (form of) consciousness enters the child while it’s lying inside the mother’s womb ? The consciousness : ‘I am’, which pertains to the great self” (*kā nu bhoḥ saṃjñā matur udare ’vasthitam kumāram praty abhiniviśata iti ? asmīty eṣā mātātmī saṃvid iti*), The *Yuktidīpikā*, edited and translated by Shiv KUMAR and D. N. BHARGAVA, Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, 1992, Vol. 2, p. 227.

9 Translated by G. J. LARSON, *Classical Sāṃkhya*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1969, p. 279.

10 See Gauḍapāda’s commentary on *kārikā* 44, ed. MAINKAR, p. 119.

case if liberation were equivalent to any kind of “private” *pralaya*. Then, the resorption would start from the last evolutes, that is the *mahābhūta*, and from there spread to the subtle elements, the senses and the *manas* before reaching *ahamkāra* and finally *buddhi*.<sup>11</sup> In the same way, any isolated dissolution of *manas* as well as of *buddhi* would have only empirical consequences, like absent-mindedness, dullness, madness, etc. Let us conclude that the word *ahamkāra* stands here for something transcendental: neither a mundane reality nor an organ of thought, like *manas* or *buddhi*. Its constant connection with *abhimāna* invites us to consider it as the most concrete embodiment of that beginningless “ignorance” (*avidyā*) or “lack of discrimination” (*aviveka*) that the Sāṃkhya literature is never tired of exposing as the fundamental cause of suffering and of transmigration. Now, *ahamkāra*, as the first “product” of ignorance, will also be beginningless, and from there, precisely, we may gain some insight into the vexed question of the ambiguity of the intermediate *tattva*.

We need first to come back to the mutual overlapping of the two fundamental principles as described in *kārikā* 20: “Because of the proximity (or association) of the two – i.e. *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* – the unconscious one appears as if characterized by consciousness. Similarly, the indifferent one appears as if characterized by activity, because of the activities of the *guṇa*”:<sup>12</sup> *tasmād tatsamyogād acetanaṃ cetanāvad iva liṅgam / guṇa-kartrtve ca tathā karteva bhavaty udāsīnaḥ //*. This transcendental interplay makes room for an intermediate field, the reality of which is not ultimate but only experiential and provisory. It enjoys neither absolute selfhood (the privilege of the *puruṣa*) nor complete objectivity (the privilege of the *prakṛti* or *avyakta*). At the same time, it provides a basis for the subject-object relationship in so far it allows the *puruṣa* to appear as agent (*kartr*) and enjoyer (*bhoktr*).

In this context the genius of the Sāṃkhya thinkers was to resort to the notion of *guṇa* (whatever its origin in the history of thought) as a conceptual instrument to provide this intermediary, half-real field with a theoretical status and, first of all, with an intelligible internal structure. Actually, the *guṇa* can very easily be interpreted in terms of greater or

11 See for instance *Gauḍapāda*’s commentary on the word *liṅgam* in *kārikā* 10 : *layakāle pañca mahābhūtāni tanmātreṣu liyante tāni ekādaśendriyaiḥ sahāhamkāre sa ca buddhau sā ca pradhāne layam yātīti*, ed. MAINKAR, p. 30.

12 G. J. LARSON’s translation (slightly modified), *op. cit.*, p. 265.

lesser proximity to (or remoteness from) the two basic *tattva*. That is the *sattva* imitates some of the most essential properties of the *puruṣa* while the *tamas* shows a striking affinity to those of *prakṛti*. As for the *rajas*, we may look at it as reflecting the unsteady mutual balance of the two other *guṇa*. Moreover, according to *kārikā* 12, they “successively dominate, support, activate and interact with one another”:<sup>13</sup> *anyonyābhibhāvāśrayajanana-mithunavṛttayaś ca...* The *guṇa* are mutually inseparable while at the same time in constant rivalry. None of them is ever in a position to completely supplant the two others.

That means we are bound to come across – according to the parallelism of macrocosm and microcosm which classical Sāṃkhya, like most philosophies of ancient India, seems to take for granted – the same overall repartition of the *guṇa* in the living beings and in the universe. Everywhere, *sattva* will dominate “above”, *rajas* “in the middle” and *tamas* “down below”. Ontologically, it is obvious that the relative importance of *sattva* is constantly declining from *buddhi* downwards to the *mahābhūta* (the reverse for *tamas*).<sup>14</sup> The same holds good for the cosmos, according to *kārikā* 54 and its commentaries where *sattva* is associated with gods and heavenly regions, *tamas* with the animal world and *rajas* with the human world.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the *guṇa* structure may be considered as the very foundation of a real ontological continuity extending throughout the whole field of manifestation. This leads to various consequences, three of which have special relevance to the present inquiry.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

14 It's interesting to remark in this context that *ahaṁkāra*, in spite of its coming just after *buddhi* in the hierarchy of *tattva*, does not show any special affinity of that kind to *sattva*. More generally, it makes no sense to ascribe a more or less “sattvic” or “tamasic” *ahaṁkāra* to different kinds of living beings, or to different human individuals, or to the same individual at different moments of his spiritual evolution. One more proof that *ahaṁkāra* is not just an element of the psychic apparatus or a *tattva* among others in the manifested world.

15 Although the *Kārikā* themselves insist on the essential unity of mankind (k. 53 : ... *mānuṣaś caikavidhaḥ*) there are clear marks in the Dharmaśāstra- and Purāṇa literature of some different anthropology which tends to interpret – and justify – the social hierarchy of *varṇa* in terms of *guṇa* (for instance, the Brahmins as more “sattvic”, the śūdra as more “tamasic”, etc.). Besides that, the constant association of human life with *rajas*, the *guṇa* expressive of suffering, is well in accordance with the so-called “pessimism” of classical Sāṃkhya.

First, the *guṇa* can never be considered as purely subjective or as purely objective, neither as individual moods projected onto a “neutral”, external reality nor as intrinsic properties of things, independently from their appreciation by man. This becomes evident from Gauḍapāda’s commentary on the expression *anyonya... vṛttayayaś ca* in *kārikā* 12: “Thus a beautiful and virtuous woman is a source of delight to all, and she herself is the cause of pain to her co-wives; and again, she herself produces delusion in the passionate – in this manner *sattva* leads to the manifestation of *rajas* and *tamas*. Again, just as a king, assiduous in protecting his people and punishing the wicked, produces pleasure in the good people, and pain and delusion in the wicked – in this manner *rajas* leads to the manifestation of *sattva* and *tamas*. Again, *tamas* leads to the manifestation of *sattva* and *rajas* by its own nature of covering : just as the (monsoon) clouds covering the sky cause happiness to the people (in general), urge the farmer to activity by their rain and produce delusion in the lovers in separation.”<sup>16</sup> The beautiful and virtuous woman, for instance, may be considered *in abstracto* as purely sattvic. This is however impossible because of the necessary coexistence and mutual interplay of the three attributes inside every creature, animate or inanimate. Moreover, this sattvic character of her will be acknowledged by those only that are not too much blinded by their own passions. On the other hand, the Sāṃkhya doctrine is not completely relativistic: this woman really deserves, as compared to some other women, to be called sattvic. Those who consider her as such have some right to do so, even if some “reserves” of *rajas* and *tamas* are lying within her, ready to allow her to appear in a different light to less neutral spectators.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, that same *guṇa*-structure has to be conceived as “cutting through” the different spheres of reality: physical, biological, psychical, intellectual and even ethical or spiritual. *Tamas*, for instance, refers to heaviness and darkness (physical), vegetative life (biological), dullness (psychical), slow-wittedness (intellectual), delusion or infatuation

16 T. G. MAINKAR’s translation (slightly modified), *op. cit.*, p. 40.

17 It would seem that one of the superiorities of *sattva* lies in the capacity it grants to recognise less reluctantly the real presence of *rajas*, *tamas*, and of itself, in other beings and in various situations. See, for instance, *Yuktidīpikā* 13 where the possibility of quasi objective judgements is recognised in the case of “co-wives acting for a single purpose” (i.e. pleasing the king), or to “the wives of noble men staying in their houses with their husbands”, or to “farmers who have cut their crops”, *Yuktidīpikā*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 55.

(spiritual). *Sattva*, of course, will include the opposite qualities. In the same way, *rajas* will refer to restlessness (physical), drive or urge (biological), suffering and passion (psychical), ardour in controversy (intellectual), fierce asceticism (spiritual).<sup>18</sup> At the same time, this does not prevent the *guṇa*-structure from building the very foundation of their hierarchical order, with *tamas* predominating in the physical and biological realms, *rajas* in psychic life, *sattva* in spiritual life, etc. Such an ontological continuity, while ultimately compatible with the so-called “dualism” of the Sāṃkhya doctrine, will eventually call for a complete reinterpretation of this dualism, so as to stress its difference from what is usually understood under that term in western philosophy.

Thirdly, the subject-object relationship – as *jñāna*, *karma* or *bhoga* – is bound to appear as a particular case of a phenomenon of much wider extension : the interplay of *guṇa*. Due to the overall extension of *prakṛti* and its evolutes, what is going on “inside” the subject, his concrete emotional and intellectual life, is not fundamentally different from what is going on “outside”, in the world. There is no unbridgeable gulf between internal or “psychological” events and external ones because the very same *guṇa* are at play on both sides. Spinoza’s famous saying, according to which man is not “an empire inside an empire” may be most fittingly applied to Sāṃkhya. It means that even the most sophisticated processes of thought, up to the threshold of crucial discrimination (*viveka*), have to be interpreted in terms of *guṇa* co-operating with one another and reacting on one another. The *buddhi*, in particular, is not really conscious by itself. It’s just a very intricate complex of functions upon which the predominance of *sattva* (never exclusive of the two other *guṇa*) confers the capacity of *imitating* the actual consciousness that belongs to the sole *puruṣa*. There is no such thing as “thinking” as a purely immaterial process. Only the agility of the comparatively sattvic *buddhi*, its almost complete lack of inertia, allows us to confound its extremely fast but still temporal functionings with the total immobility (*akartṛtva*) of the *puruṣa*.

We may now perhaps begin to understand why the Sāṃkhya thinkers did not pay much attention to dilemmas that are crucial to us, like “is there only one cosmic *buddhi* or as many *buddhi* as individual beings?”, etc. Not

18 This would call, of course, for english equivalents possessing the same kind of wide semantic extension. Such equivalents are practically unobtainable. One may resort, at a pinch, to “inertia” (for *tamas*), “tension” (for *rajas*) and “lightness” (for *sattva*).

that they were completely unaware of such questions : their admission of the periodic world dissolution (*pralaya*), for instance, does imply a certain consciousness of their relevance. However, oppositions, like the one between general and particular (*samasta-vyasta*), were not final to them. They were looking at them, at least implicitly, as belonging to that impure, only half real sphere of experience that owes its existence to the transcendental confusion of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. We tried to characterise *aḥamkāra* as the most direct expression of that confusion. Individual experience – both emotional and intellectual – makes sense only as long as *aḥamkāra* prevails. Once it vanishes, in the wake of discrimination, there is no ground anymore to contrast the personal with the universal perspective. As for the “temporary” continuation of individual, psychic experience, the Sāṃkhya thinkers, quite understandably, were prepared to admit a certain degree of apparent contradiction within it, as a mark, so to say, of its ultimate lack of authenticity, also as a promise of its inevitable collapse in some more or less remote future.

One of the major difficulties we are coming across while trying to understand classical Sāṃkhya lies in some hidden presuppositions of our own western philosophical tradition. Among those presuppositions one of the most dangerous seems to go back at least to Descartes and his characterisation of the soul, or *res cogitans* as “*dubitans, intelligens, affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque et sentiens*”.<sup>19</sup> While writing those lines Descartes was in no way conscious of making an intellectual choice or advocating some special philosophical thesis. He was just making explicit what he thought was everybody’s implicit understanding of what the words “*res cogitans*” stand for. Nevertheless, starting from such premises, it’s hardly possible, actually, to do justice to doctrines like Sāṃkhya (or Advaita for that matter) that tend to strip the spiritual principle of any concrete activity or sentiency, interpreting at the same time the whole psychological life on the lines of what is going on in the external world. To that extent, a fresh study of classical Sāṃkhya may still prove fruitful, especially in helping us to overcome – and firstly to become conscious of – some of our most deep-rooted intellectual prejudices.

19 *Meditatio secunda* in F. Alquié (ed.) *Descartes, oeuvres philosophiques*, vol. II, Garnier, Paris, 1967, p. 186.