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BHARTṚHARI IN HIS TIME AND IN OURS *

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*na so ásti pratyayo loke yaḥ śabdānugamādṛte /
anuviddham iva jñānam sarva śabdena bhāsate // (Vkp¹ 1.131)*

‘There is no cognition in the world that does not follow words. All knowledge appears as if permeated by words.’ (tr. Houben 1995: 76)

This is probably the most cited verse from Bhartṛhari’s *Vākyapadīya*. It is often understood to mean that according to Bhartṛhari, all cognition is somehow pervaded by words.

This conclusion is wrong. Many other verses from the *Vākyapadīya* show that Bhartṛhari believed no such thing. These other verses rather indicate that Bhartṛhari also recognized another form of cognition, one reserved to seers. The cognition meant in the above verse is cognition *in the world* (*pratyayo loke*). Beside this, there is also cognition that is *not of this world* (*alaukika*). Consider the following verses:

*yac copaghātajam jñānam yac ca jñānam alaukikam /
na tābhyām vyavahāro’asti śabdā lokanibandhanāḥ // (Vkp 2.297)*

‘Knowledge arising from a defect [in the organs of perception] and knowledge that is not of this world (*alaukika*), verbal usage does not take place on the basis of these two; words are based on everyday life (*loka*).’ (tr. Houben 1995: 276; modified)

* This paper was written for the 3rd International Conference on Bhartṛhari which, to my knowledge, never took place.

1 *Vkp* – Bhartṛhari, *Vākyapadīya*, ed. W. Rau, Wiesbaden 1977.

*rṣīṅām darśanam yacca tattve kiñcid avasthitam /
na tena vyavahāro 'asti na tacchabdanibandhanam // (Vkp 2.139)*

‘What the seers see and what is established in [the highest] reality, is not expressed in language, it is not based on words.’

We learn more about this cognition from the following verses:

*sarvārtharūpatā śuddhir jñānasya nirupāśrayā /
tato 'apy asya parām śuddhim eke prāhur arūpikām //
upaplavo hi jñānasya bāhyākārānupātītā /
kāluṣyam iva tat tasya samsarge vyatibhedajam // (Vkp 3.3.56-57)*

‘To have the form of the totality of objects, without [dependence on] a support, is purity of cognition. Some say that [if] it has a purity which is without any form whatsoever, [this] is still higher than that [other purity]. It is indeed a distortion of the cognition when it follows an outer form. It acquires a kind of impurity, which arises from the close connection when there is commingling [with the object].’ (tr. Houben 1995: 277; modified)

Vākyapadiya 1.37 speaks of those ‘whose minds are not distorted’ (*anupaplutacetās*) and ‘in whom insight has manifested itself’ (*āvīrbhūtaprakāśa*); they have knowledge of the past and of the future; the following verse 1.38 refers to the same beings when it states that ‘with the vision of a seer they see things which are beyond the senses and unknowable’:

*āvīrbhūtaprakāśānām anupaplutacetāsām /
atītānāgatajñānam pratyakṣān na viśiṣyate //
atīndriyān asamvedyān paśyantyārṣeṇa cakṣuṣā /
ye bhāvān vacanam teṣām nānumānena bādhyate // (Vkp 1.37-38)*

It follows from the above that Bhartṛhari recognizes two kinds of cognition, one that is commonly used 'in the world', and another one that is 'not of the world'.

Bhartṛhari was not original in introducing this distinction. Buddhism, since the days of the scholastic revolution that took place in the north-western regions of the subcontinent presumably during the second century BCE, maintained that the world of our everyday experience is not ultimately real, and depends on words. Non-conceptual awareness, which is beyond the realm of speech, gives access to a higher reality. Later Buddhist thinkers, most notably from Dinnāga onward, systematized this vision and maintained that there are two forms of cognition, the one direct but free from conceptual constructs (*vikalpa*, *kalpanā*) and from words, the other one *with* such constructs and determined by words. Dinnāga certainly was aware of Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* and was influenced by it, but he also continued and gave systematic expression to a position that had been held by Buddhists for centuries.

Probably under the influence of Buddhist thinkers, subsequent Brahmanical philosophers introduced a distinction between cognition with and cognition without conceptual constructs: *savikalpaka* and *nirvikalpaka jñāna pratyakṣa*. But already the *Yogaśāstra*, which presumably dates from around 400 CE and is therefore older than Bhartṛhari, introduced the notion of *vikalpa* and defines it as follows (*sūtra* 1.9): '*Vikalpa* ('conceptual construct') results from the knowledge of words, but is devoid of objective referent.' (*śabdajñānānupātī vastuśūnyo vikalpaḥ*). By stating that conceptual constructs are devoid of objective referent, the *Yogaśāstra* betrays the Buddhist influence it had undergone.

Bhartṛhari's originality does not lie in the fact that he recognizes different levels of cognition, nor even in the claim that one of these two gives access to a higher reality. It lies rather in the way he

presents this higher reality. It is beyond words, to be sure, but Bhartṛhari succeeds nonetheless in saying several things about it. Most important among these is that the highest reality to which pure cognition gives access has the form of the totality of objects. It is the totality of all there is, considered as a whole. This tendency to attribute a higher reality to wholes than to their parts pervades Bhartṛhari's philosophy elsewhere too, and finds expression in such well-known positions as that the word is more real than its constituent parts, the sentence more real than its constituent words, etc.

It is not my intention to say more about Bhartṛhari's vision of ultimate reality, but rather to concentrate on his understanding of cognition. We have already seen that Bhartṛhari fits in this respect quite well in his historical context. But rather than further concentrating on his historical context, I will now turn to what we make of this understanding of cognition in our present, modern context. Does it make sense to think of cognition as being of two kinds, either with or without conceptual constructs, either determined by language or not being so determined?

I think it does so long as we do not insist on positing too radical a break between the two kinds of cognition. Rather than postulating that there are two levels of cognition, the one with and the other without conceptual constructs, it may be more useful to think of a sliding scale between the two: conceptual constructs are not either present or absent, they rather can be present to different degrees. This position has various advantages.

The first advantage is that it avoids a confrontation with those modern philosophers and scholars of mysticism who reject the idea that there can be such a thing as non-conceptual mental content. This is a contested issue in which we now do not need to take sides (see Bermudez & Cahen 2012, for an overview). Those who deny that

there can be non-conceptual mental content may agree with Bhartṛhari to the extent that ordinary cognition is permeated by words and concepts, but they will reject that conceptual cognition depends on non-conceptual cognition. By not insisting on the existence of a form of cognition that is completely free from conceptual constructs, we may be able to avoid a fruitless debate.

The second advantage lies in the fact that conceptual cognition must be thought of in terms of associations between different mental contents. The precise nature of these mental contents may for the time being remain unspecified, just like the neural structures that are responsible for them. It seems yet clear that the recognition of, say, a dog depends on associative connections with the memory of earlier experiences in which dogs played a role. The associations between mental contents that underlie conceptual cognition might conceivably be more or less numerous, thus making cognition more or less 'conceptual'. The conceptual aspect of conceptual cognition may in this way be reduced, but there is no need to insist (or to deny) that this conceptual aspect can be completely eliminated.

Given the above, we may say that there is a continuum of cognitive states, ranging from full conceptual cognition to a cognition in which the conceptual aspect has been reduced to a minimum. This may suffice to make sense of Bhartṛhari's two kinds of cognition; what we add is that the break between the two is, at least in theory, not as radical as he may have believed. In fact, the transition between the two is gradual.

Let us now recall what Bhartṛhari has to say about the cognition that is not of this world. According to him, supernormal knowledge is not the basis of verbal usage, the highest reality cannot be expressed in language, it is not based on words. Pure cognition has the totality of things as object, or it is without form whatsoever. This is in perfect agreement with our understanding of the effects of the acquisition of language (for details see Bronkhorst 2012 and especially 2016).

When learning language, we learn to “carve up” our experience into chunks that correspond to the concepts created under the influence of language. If, by whatever means, we succeed in freeing ourselves, if only for a few moments, from the conditioning imposed by language, we experience a “different reality” that cannot be expressed in language. The reason is that the scheme imposed by language has now been withdrawn, if only for a while. And since the “carving up” of reality has been temporarily withdrawn, we experience the world as being “whole” in a manner that we cannot experience so long as we see the world through the glasses of language.

Few modern thinkers will swallow Bhartṛhari’s philosophy whole. This is no reason to ignore an aspect of his thought from which we moderns can still learn.

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