

# Bhartrhari's Perspectivism as a Philosophical Strategy: Its Origins and Possible Interpretations\*

Evgeniya Desnitskaya

St. Petersburg State University

St. Petersburg, Russia

E-mail: e.desnickaja@spbu.ru

**Abstract**—The 'Vakyapadiya' of Bhartrhari, the famous Indian linguistic philosopher (5th CE), presents many different, often mutually exclusive, views on language and its relationship with cognitive processes and extra-linguistic relation. Modern scholars designate this methodological approach as perspectivism. This paper provides the analysis of perspectivism as a philosophical strategy. Two general features of Bhartrhari's perspectivism have been identified, namely the functional attitude and the idea of the relative incompleteness of every single doctrine. The origin of both features has been traced in the works of the ancient grammarians as well as in the earlier Brahmanic texts.

**Keywords**—*Bhartrhari; Vākyapadīya; Indian linguistic philosophy; perspectivism; Indian grammar; ritual pragmatics*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Indian Grammar (Vyākaraṇa) dates back to late Vedic period. Initially it emerged as an auxiliary discipline intended to preserve the usage of the correct linguistic forms - particularly in the course of Vedic ritual. The fundamental works of this period are Paṇini's 'Aṣṭādhyāyī' (~IV BCE) and Patañjali's 'Mahābhāṣya' (II BCE). Both works mainly deal with technical aspects of grammar, though Patañjali occasionally also discussed some philosophical problems. From then onwards, grammar was highly esteemed and considered an important part of traditional education in India. But the true origin of grammar as a philosophical discipline is connected with the name of Bhartrhari (~V CE), the author of the treatise 'Vākyapadīya' (VP) and the partly lost commentary on the 'Mahābhāṣya'. Bhartrhari proclaimed himself the successor of the three ancient grammarians – Paṇini, Kātyāyana and Patañjali. Later doxographers considered him the proponent of the so-called 'Pāṇinīyadarśana', though there are no historical evidences that 'Pāṇinīyadarśana' existed as a monolithic philosophical tradition at the times of Paṇini or Bhartrhari.

VP is an extensive work, where different ontological and epistemological aspects of language are discussed. Dealing with different views, Bhartrhari usually tends to demonstrate that each of them is justified in a certain context and reflects a certain perspective of reality. That's why modern scholars usually designate his philosophical approach as

perspectivism. The term of 'perspectivism' dates back to 'Monadologie' of Leibniz [1]. For the first time in a study of Indian philosophy the term was introduced by Halbfass, mainly with respect to Jainas and Vedāntins [2]. With respect to Bhartrhari it was generally elaborated by Houben, who demonstrated, how this approach is realized on different occasions in VP [3] [4].

Still, the concept of perspectivism needs to be investigated in the general context of Bhartrhari's philosophy. Halbfass in his response to Houben's paper noted, that the question remains, whether Bhartrhari's 'doctrinal tolerance' was 'simply part of an inclusivistic strategy to uphold and promote his own basic ideas and systematic commitment?' [5]. It should be also noted, that George Cardona disagreed with the very concept of perspectivism in VP, claiming that Bhartrhari as a 'Pāṇinīya' usually defended a single standpoint, so one should read the commentaries in order to learn which of the opinions listed in VP is the true Bhartrhari's point of view [6]. Cardona generally follows the view of Indian traditional doxographers who were unfamiliar with the idea of historical development and presented philosophical doctrines in a synchronic perspective, as if they have not been subject to change with the course of time. This is an emic approach to the study of Indian philosophy. Though it is quite promising for reconstructions of the traditional understanding of Indian philosophy, it must be supplemented by an etic approach intended for describing Indian philosophical concepts 'from outside', i.e. in the frames of modern humanities. There is no other way to overcome the isolation of Indology from other branches of humanities and make Indian philosophical tradition a part of the world philosophy.

It should be also noted that perspectivism is not an intrinsic concept of Bhartrhari's philosophy, but rather a conceptual means applied for the analysis of Bhartrhari's philosophy undertaken in an etic perspective. The grammarians, for their part, were aware that grammar is open to different views. This was already noted by Patañjali [7]. Bhartrhari also discussed the multiplicity of views (darśana), but it seems, he did not reflect much on his own methodology and did not conceptualize it as a specific philosophical doctrine, as it happened in the case of the Jainas with their doctrine of anekāntavāda.

\*This work was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (RSF) under Grant 16-18-10427.

It seems quite suggestive considering Bhartṛhari's perspectivism as the means by which initially non-philosophical grammar dealt with the doctrines of the other schools with a well-known philosophical background. In the terms of 'central' / 'peripheral', it can be claimed that 'peripheral' grammar used perspectivism approach in order to establish itself on a par with the 'mainstream' philosophical schools of the time. Indeed, Bhartṛhari's philosophy is often considered a Brahmanical project to confront the influence of the Buddhists. Still, this social factor, the willingness to bring grammar into philosophical arena, was not the only or decisive factor for Bhartṛhari to introduce perspectivism approach. There were also some philosophical reasons.

So, Bhartṛhari's perspectivism needs to be investigated further. In this paper I will concentrate on two interrelated questions concerning Bhartṛhari's perspectivism:

- Provided that perspectivism was really the case in VP, what was the philosophical strategy to which it belonged? Did Bhartṛhari possess his own point of view, or was his perspectivism approach totally relativistic?
- Was perspectivism Bhartṛhari's innovation, or can we find perspectivism trends in some previous works?

In the following parts of my paper both questions will be discussed successively.

## II. PERSPECTIVISM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL STRATEGY

From a historical point of view, the theoretical principles of Bhartṛhari's perspectivism can be linked with the general shift from ontology to epistemology in Indian philosophy that happened in the middle of the 1st Millennium CE. This shift was indeed connected with the Buddhists, from whom Bhartṛhari borrowed a lot, but whom he also influenced greatly. In this context, perspectivism can be viewed as a means to consider different ontological doctrines in an epistemological perspective. Ontologically oriented paradigm of philosophical thinking is based on the presupposition that every philosophical problem must be solved in a single unambiguous way. In the frames of the new epistemological paradigm a problem may have several solutions, each of them being justified on functional level, depending on the position of the cognizer. E.g. VP III.3.32 claims that word is the cause of the meaning in the case of the hearer, while the meaning is the cause of the word in the case of the speaker [8]. So, the answer to the question of the causal relation between word and meaning depends on the perspective in which it is considered. And it is the functional efficiency that is the basis for justification.

Thus, epistemological approach is intrinsically connected with functionalism. The first characteristic feature of Bhartṛhari's perspectivism can be formulated as following:

- Functional attitude. In the frames of the perspectivist approach, a doctrine is considered valid inasmuch as the processes it describes are functionally efficient; in other words, a doctrine must be in agreement with the daily practice (vyavahāra).

Different views are based on different presuppositions; each view can be valid in the frames of a certain practical situation. This functional approach enables to justify mutually exclusive doctrines, demonstrating that each of them is formulated in a certain functional context. As a result, VP presents a vast variety of linguistic doctrines initially elaborated by different schools of Indian philosophy.

There is also another question we should discuss, in order to formulate the basic characteristics of Bhartṛhari's approach. Did Bhartṛhari possess his own point of view, or was his perspectivist approach totally relativistic?

First of all, it should be noted that there is a certain inconsistency between the introduction of VP and the rest of the treatise. In the beginning verses Bhartṛhari elaborates the ontology of Śabda-Brahman, the linguistic Absolute that can be accessed by revelation only. So, of all the means of valid cognition (pramāṇa) only revelation (āgama) is considered valid, whereas rational inquiry is designated speculation (tarka) (VP I.30). As the following 2000 verses of VP exemplify tarka, the question arises, whether the ontology of Śabda-Brahman was just one of the numerous theories listed in VP? Or are those scholars right who consider this teaching the core of Bhartṛhari's philosophy?

Being limited in time I will not elaborate this problem in detail here. But in my general opinion, these two options can be considered complementary. Indeed, every theory is restricted by the perspective in which it is formulated. Ontological theory will not help describing the cognitive processes or language behavior, and – vice versa – particular functional theories will be of no use in solving ontological questions. The concept of Śabda-Brahman accords with Brahmanic general ontological tendencies and justifies the importance of the Vedas. In this sense it is certainly the central concept of VP. But Bhartṛhari as a grammarian could not confine himself with monistic ontology, he also had to describe how linguistic behavior and cognitive processes can be performed. Each doctrine is generally incomplete, as it reflects only a single aspect of reality. This relative incompleteness accounts for the plurality of doctrines. Different rational doctrines are complementary to each other as they represent different perspectives of reality. It is only through non-rational revelation, that reality can be grasped in its totality.

Thus, the second feature of Bhartṛhari's perspectivism can be formulated as following:

- Relative incompleteness of every single doctrine. Mutually exclusive doctrines are considered equally valid, as every single doctrine cannot comprise the reality as it is, it is a priori incomplete with respect to it and reflects only one of its parts.

## III. ON POSSIBLE ORIGINS OF PERSPECTIVISM

In the previous section I identified two general characteristics of Bhartṛhari's perspectivism, namely (1) the functional attitude and (2) the idea of the relative incompleteness of every single doctrine. A study of these features might help us tracing the origins of perspectivism in

Bhartrhari's philosophy. Both features can be traced in earlier works on grammar and – to some extent – even in the Vedas, which means that the origins of Bhartrhari's perspectivism might go back to as early as the Vedic period.

In Indian grammatical tradition prior to Bhartrhari, perspectivist trends can be discovered in Patañjali's 'Mahābhāṣya'. Patañjali claimed that grammar is the discipline that embraces all the differences between schools. Sometimes he also admitted the validity of the mutually exclusive solutions, e.g. while discussing the problem of the referent of the word. In the introductory part of the 'Mahābhāṣya' he considered the question of what does the word 'cow' refer to? Is its referent universal or substance? Patañjali accepted both views, demonstrating that each of them is valid as it accords with the general claim that words, their referents and relation between them are of permanent nature.

In the earlier period the tendency to accept mutually exclusive answers to a single question can be discovered also in the texts belonging to the Vedic corpus, especially in some Vedic hymns (the most prominent example is the 'Riddle-hymn' RV I.164) and in the Upanishads (Iśā). The pluralistic approach of these texts certainly represents the variety of views and doctrines which existed at the time. But the reason to collect all these views in a single work could probably have been connected with the inability of their authors to express the highest truth in the terms of one consistent doctrine (similarly as in the case of Bhartrhari).

The second feature of Bhartrhari's perspectivism, namely the functional attitude, can be also tracked in the earlier tradition. An example can be found in the 'Mahābhāṣya', in the discussion of prohibitions and prescriptions. Patañjali discussed the question, why should one use correct Sanskrit words, while the same meaning can be also understood from incorrect words. The answer is: for the sake of dharma – similarly as it is with some Vedic restrictions. E.g., a brahmin observes a vow of living on milk, kshatriya on gruel. But why not observe a vow of living on meat and rice? Similarly, the sacrificial post to which the sacrificial animal is tied should be made of bilva wood or khadira wood. But it is possible to tie an animal to any piece of wood, irrespective of whether it is raised or not. In all cases, Patañjali claims, true prescriptions and prohibitions should be followed for the sake of dharma. Wrong or parodical prohibitions and prescriptions would not lead to dharma, hence they are functionally inefficient and as such should not be followed.

Functional aspect of the perspectivist approach can be traced in the Brāhmaṇas, where the model of the three levels of exegesis has been elaborated. According to it, a single Vedic passage can be interpreted differently from different points of view: adhyātma (referring to the self), adhiyajña (referring to the sacrifice) and adhidaiva (referring to the deities or the cosmos) [9]. As a result, different modes of interpretation could have been considered equally valid, as each of them was formulated in a certain pragmatic perspective. So, generally it can be assumed that functional attitude accords with the tendency of the Vedic ritualism to

consider pragmatic activity as the only source of true knowledge.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

So, the origins of Bhartrhari's perspectivism can be detected in the works of the earlier grammarians and also in some works of the late Vedic period, in which the both major trends, viz. functional attitude and the idea of the inexpressibility of the true reality, can be tracked. On a synchronic level, it is possible to consider Bhartrhari's perspectivism a reaction of the grammatical tradition on the social and philosophical challenges which arose in the interaction with the 'mainstream' schools of the time. However, on a diachronic level, Bhartrhari's perspectivism appears a philosophical elaboration of the trends, inherited from the pragmatics of Vedic ritual. Functional attitude was the part and parcel of Vedic ritualism. Vyākaraṇa, initially evolved as vedāṅga, could have inherited the functional approach from Vedic ritual and later on Bhartrhari elaborated it in the context of his linguistic philosophy.

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