

BLOOMSBURY INTRODUCTIONS  
TO WORLD PHILOSOPHIES

**THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF THE  
YOGASUTRA**

An Introduction



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of external reality (Burley 2007). For Burley, the Sāṃkhya taxonomy represents consciousness and subjectivity, but not objective materiality itself, which, he argues, is not addressed in this system.<sup>1</sup> Burley therefore presents the twenty-three evolutes of *prakṛti* as a set of transcendental conditions of possibility rather than an account of material causality in which gross elements such as air, fire, water, etc. emerge from subtle (mental) elements such as intelligence, egoity or mind. Ashton (2020) makes a related argument, by positing that the existential mix-up between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* takes place not at a general metaphysical level, but rather specifically between *puruṣa* and *mūlaprakṛti* (primordial materiality). Somewhat in line with Burley (2007), Ashton argues that when viewed this way, the emanation of *prakṛti* refers not to the whole of material reality but to the particular instantiation of a human being and its experience of reality over one lifetime (an embodied existence that is fashioned from *mūlaprakṛti*).

I propose an understanding that can encompass both philosophical standpoints, i.e. that *prakṛti* refers to ‘materiality’, ‘material objective world’ or even ‘principle of materiality’ while also acknowledging that Burley’s and Ashton’s arguments for a centring of subjectivity over objectivity are compelling. So, let’s posit that the emanations of *prakṛti* point to the array of substantial components of objective reality, including (but not limited to) the human embodied subject and beginning with this facet of reality (subjectivity) because it constitutes the standpoint from which we can start to ‘know’ the rest of material reality. These points will be discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book. For now, however, let’s stay with the big picture of what reality consists of.

### What is a dualist reality?

In the broadest terms, reality is, as Larson and Bhattacharya analysed (2008), co-fundamental and co-ultimate – neither materiality nor consciousness can be subtracted from reality, and neither principle supersedes the other. Indeed, although independent, both facets

are necessary to make up the whole. The dualism is thus about irreconcilable difference, and the rational method proposed in Sāṃkhya and followed in Pātañjala yoga is about the perception of this difference (*vivekakhyaṭi*, or ‘discriminating discernment’). The word *sāṃkhya* itself carries the meaning of ‘enumeration’ or ‘counting’. This expresses the idea that knowing reality is to be able to accurately enumerate and describe its constituents, at the most basic level in the discrimination between consciousness and materiality and, in a more textured sense, to know the 25 constituents (*tattvas*) of reality, including all the complex material emanations (see Figure 1). This knowledge of the essential features of reality leads to apprehension of the true nature of the world – and how time, space, materiality and consciousness all function in relation. Many scholars have commented on the apparent equivalence in this dualist metaphysics – that consciousness and matter are separate but equal. However, there are two key points pertaining to this metaphysics that challenge this claim. The first is the clear privileging of knowledge over embodiment in the account of subjectivity (discussed next) and the second point is the way in which this dualist division is constructed through gendered concepts (discussed below).

### **The value and purpose of materiality and consciousness**

The first point is that the ultimate vision of truth in this worldview identifies consciousness as the prime principle and not materiality. When the subject correctly perceives reality as dual, they also correctly perceive the true self as pure consciousness. While the material body is subject to decay in the material world (with each life cycle representing that very power of *prakṛti* to emanate and then dissolve), there is a deeper, unseen dimension to the self. This dimension, consciousness, is not part of the material world and is never subject to change or deterioration. In this sense, Sāṃkhya-Yoga offers us an understanding of an enduring part of the self that does not die. But it is not termed the *ātman* or self of Brahmanism, nor the *jīva* or soul/self of Jainism, nor, indeed,

the *anātman* or non-self of Buddhism. Rather this is a theory of consciousness as a part of ourselves (the enduring part) that is termed *puruṣa*. In some sense, this connects to questions of a modern sensibility, such as ‘is there life after death?’, ‘does consciousness die when the body dies?’, ‘is consciousness a property of the brain or the wider body?’, ‘can we download consciousness to AI’ or ‘can we preserve consciousness by cryogenizing the body?’ and so on. There is a distinctly atheist quality to the way in which Sāṃkhya drily investigates and then answers some of these questions. This has led some scholars to argue that the Sāṃkhya-Yoga approach sits somewhat apart from the metaphysics of the other early root texts, which each subscribe to the authority of the Vedas in explicit ways and which resolve existential divisions through *brahman*, a non-dual (and impersonal) principle that constitutes all of reality.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, so unusual was the dualism of Sāṃkhya-Yoga metaphysics that later commentators – primarily from Vedānta but also from Śaivism<sup>3</sup> – sought to resolve it in a non-dual synthesis that sublimated *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* into a higher unitary principle of *brahman*. But the root texts themselves, the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* and the *Yogasūtra*, do not easily lend themselves to this interpretation – as we will see in our discussion of theism, below.

In many senses, the *Yogasūtra* is working out the longstanding tension between action and non-action in early Indian philosophy (see also Chapter 7: Ethics). The importance of action is reflected not only in the theory of karmic retribution (the ethical consequences of action), but also in the older Vedic primacy of ritual action (as reflected in Patañjali’s Vedic-inflected formula of *kriyā yoga*).<sup>4</sup> On the whole, however, the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* reflects a world in which the gnostic soteriology of the *Upaniṣads* has won out. In the tension between archaic Vedic action (ritual) and newer emphases on rational knowledge (philosophical contemplation), knowledge clearly wins the day as the means to become liberated. This does not mean that there is no place for action: materiality and consciousness are co-dependent. Likened respectively to ‘the blind’ and ‘the lame’ (SK 21), one cannot see and the other cannot act, and so both principles are co-fundamental to reality.

Perfect consciousness alone (*puruṣa*) cannot constitute reality, and its contentless (translucent) awareness is meaningless without the objective referent of materiality. Hence, even in the primacy of consciousness there is always the knower and the known, the seer and the seen (i.e. consciousness and materiality).

However, the explanation of how contact occurs between the knower and the known in this dualist metaphysics, while framed as a non-causal relation (and hence strictly dualist), is at times ambiguous. There are some puzzling statements that appear to undermine the notion of strict dualism – those that grapple with the concept of proximity as an alternative to causality for describing the relation between subject and object. For instance, at PYŚ 2.17–2.18 we are told that objects are like magnets for consciousness. Although this proximal relation is designed to sidestep causality, it implies that consciousness cannot help but be attracted or drawn to the magnetic objective world. We can resolve this somewhat, however, by recalling the notion that *puruṣa* has no agency (cannot act) and is, rather, a witness of the entire material world – like someone spectating action on a screen. Although consciousness is attracted to the spectacle of materiality, it does not (and indeed cannot) interact with the unfolding events it witnesses.

### **Realism or idealism?**

What is implied in this metaphysical dualism is a possibility of both realist and idealist readings. If we refine our definition of realism from ‘a world that is mind-independent’ to ‘a world that is consciousness-independent’, then we could read the *prakṛti/puruṣa* division as indicating a realist metaphysics. Moreover, we find a clear refutation of idealism at YS 2.22 in which it is asserted that even though the objective world (*dṛśya*, i.e. the seen) comes to an end when liberation occurs, it does not stop existing in general for all minds, only for a particular individuated consciousness. For other minds, the world carries on.

Yet other statements contradict this. If, as we are told, *prakṛti* exists for the sake of consciousness (PYŚ 2.18),<sup>5</sup> then there is no such

independence and, if anything, the opposite of realism is implied. This passage suggests an idealist worldview in which the existence of the material world is highly dependent on consciousness and which only manifests upon the illumination of consciousness (a macro-version of the question ‘does an object exist if no subject is cognizing it?’).<sup>6</sup> PYŚ 2.18 tells us that the seen (*drśya*), i.e. the objective world, has only one purpose: to be seen by *puruṣa*, both for the sake of experience (or enjoyment) and of liberation (*apavarga*). Both consciousness and materiality, then, have a single purpose: the tendency towards self-illuminated consciousness. PYŚ 2.18 underlines this point: existential bondage is the failure to fulfil the purpose of *puruṣa*, and freedom is the fulfilment of said purpose.

There is an important caveat, however, in the case of *prakṛti*. Only manifest *prakṛti* (also called *liṅga*, with a mark or distinguishing feature) can be said to exist for the sake of *puruṣa*. In its primordial or unmanifest state (*aliṅga*, ‘without a mark’), *prakṛti* does not exist for the sake of *puruṣa* but simply resides in its own eternal nature self-sufficiently (PYŚ 2.19). This makes sense: that which has no mark or feature (*aliṅga*) cannot be witnessed as an object. There is an interesting instance here, then, in which primordial materiality (a kind of primordial ‘soup’) is beyond the metaphysical dualism of consciousness and matter and perhaps, in its own separation from the witnessing gaze of consciousness, is also ‘free’. Moreover, the non-dual quality of *prakṛti* is further highlighted; the primordial materiality (*aliṅga*) is neither being (*sat*) nor non-being (*asat*), perhaps harking back to the ‘Creation Hymn’ (‘Nāsadiya’) of the *Rg Veda* (quoted above).

Funes-Maderey (2017) argues for a reading of this dualist metaphysics as indicating ‘not totally independent of each other’ (2017: 43), if the very existence of *prakṛti* is understood as being based on a fundamental misperception: ‘in this sense, the whole manifestation of the objective world (including the mind) is dependent on the “miscognition” of the conscious principle’ (Funes-Maderey 2017: 43). However, the issue with this argument is that *puruṣa* as a principle of pure consciousness

cannot be subject to a fault such as ‘miscognition’, and hence the fault is always in the (material) mind and not in consciousness. For Funes-Maderey, Patañjali is not ‘completely anti-realis[t]’ (Funes-Maderey 2017: 43), and we can agree that neither is he completely realist. In likening the traces of idealism in Patañjali’s thought to that of Kant, Funes-Maderey concludes that although both philosophers strive ‘to prove the reality of an objective world independent of the mind’, they both achieve this by ‘conceiving [of] time in an anti-realist way, that is, not independent of our modes of cognizing it’ (Funes-Maderey 2017: 42).

The metaphysics of the *Yogasūtra* can never quite escape the tinge of idealism: if materiality exists for the sake of consciousness, and manifests only when the light of consciousness is proximate, then the material world comes into manifest expression when illuminated by consciousness and returns to the unmanifest state when the light of consciousness is absent. This cycle is often understood within a macro understanding of time, but it also explains how objects appear in consciousness in micro-time: in moments or instants. This Sāṃkhya-Yoga understanding is distinct from the Buddhist notion of objects appearing temporarily in awareness and then disappearing. Patañjali’s view is more attuned to the Vedic notion of time cycles – objects cycle in and out of manifestation according to presence or absence of consciousness. What is not entirely clear in the *Yogasūtra*, however, is the answer to this question: if consciousness is eternal and unwavering, why is there the possibility for it to be illuminating or not illuminating matter? In other words, why is everything in materiality not illuminated *all the time and at once* by the light of consciousness? Although this would be overwhelming for subjectivity and entail a divine-like omniscience, its absence still has to be explained in an otherwise eternalist metaphysics. In short, proximity as spatial closeness only partly explains the dualist relation between consciousness and matter. One final question that remains unresolved in this non-causal dualism is: what comes first in the relation of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*, proximity or illumination?

## The gender of dualism

The second issue that problematizes any understanding of this dualist metaphysics as denoting a partnership of equals is the gendered identities attributed to *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*: of consciousness as masculine and materiality as feminine. Hence, social tropes of the role of women in the early common era are reflected in metaphors that characterize *prakṛti* in the *Yogasūtra*, and these sometimes connote an inferior status in comparison to *puruṣa*.

In an attempt to justify why a material reality would exist if consciousness is the prime facet of reality, the text sometimes resorts to the gender- or class-based idea that a being of inferior (social) rank exists for the pleasure of a more privileged subject. Hence in Sāṃkhya-Yoga, *prakṛti* is sometimes described as the dancing girl who performs for the master (SK 42) or as the property of the lord in a relation that is cast as feudal:

by means of [*citta*] being seen by *puruṣa*, there exists a relationship of master and property.

(PYŚ 1.4)<sup>7</sup>

Due to its sattvic nature, awareness or *buddhi* (= *citta*) is the part of the material self that most closely resembles consciousness, but it is still part of *prakṛti*. Ultimately, the true (i.e. enduring) nature of self is understood to be consciousness and not matter. Therefore, although the metaphysics upholds an equivalence between the two, the consequence of embracing this philosophy is that consciousness and subjectivity are privileged over materiality and objectivity. We can identify a distinction of sorts between the metaphysics of the text, in which the gendered principles of reality are equal, and an androcentric ontology in which the goal of the method is to realize one's true identity, which is gendered as masculine (consciousness). These gendered ideas can be traced back to the late Vedic canon in the dual image of two birds in the tree, one eating and one watching.<sup>8</sup> However, such gender values are not necessarily evident in the early Vedas in which, if anything, the gendered dualism is

flipped. In that context, the primary Vedic goddess of note is Vāc, who presides over language, not only in its known expression to humans but in the totality of the abstract system of language itself. This idea of language – concomitant with concepts and words – is certainly closer to consciousness than to material reality and perhaps indicates that, in the transition from Vedic philosophical speculation to systematized philosophy (*darśana*), the understanding of an absolute feminine metaphysical principle transitioned from language and conceptuality to materiality. As a social trope, this would be concordant with what some scholars have argued about the diminishing status of women over the late first millennium BCE as *dharmaśāstra* literature was consolidated (Dhand 2008). In the ontology of the *Yogasūtra*, reflecting its social mores, it is not that materiality is less real than consciousness but, in the ultimate scheme of things, of lesser value.

There has been increasing gender-centric scholarship on the metaphysics of the *Yogasūtra*. Notably, Funes-Maderey, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conception of the 'flesh' and Irigaray's theory of 'the maternal-feminine', argues that there is a narcissistic quality to *puruṣa*'s perception of *prakṛti* as an object for his pleasure alone (Funes-Maderey 2019: 45). According to this feminist interpretation, *puruṣa* is recast as being like an unborn child that does not recognize its mother as the material condition that sustains it. Such an argument, of course, rejects Sāṃkhya as a system that is, ultimately, dualist and shares ground with a common philosophical reading today of the metaphysics of the *Yogasūtra* as non-dual (e.g. Whicher 2001). However, the lens I propose asks us to remain faithful to the metaphysics of the text in its expression as a dualist system, while recognizing that almost immediately in its historical reception (from Śaṅkara onwards, if we accept the *Vivaraṇa* as his eighth-century composition),<sup>9</sup> this was a difficult metaphysical position to reconcile with embodied practices that 'felt' the world in a non-dual way, combined with an irresistible and prevailing theistic trend in Hindu philosophy towards the non-dualism of *brahman-ātman*, *śiva-śakti* and *kṛṣṇa-rādhā*.

Critique notwithstanding, Funes-Maderey does find hope in a single metaphor in the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* that expresses the possibility of

a reciprocal ontology in which there is a recognition of the ‘irreducible’ body of ‘the other’ – a body of consciousness or a body of materiality (Funes-Maderey 2017: 48). We return to the analogy of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* as resembling the journey of a ‘blind’ person leading a ‘lame’ person (SK 21) – symbolically, one subject can act and the other can see, but in order to progress they are mutually interdependent (one to provide physical support and one to see the way ahead). This casts the recognition of difference (of the other) from ‘sexual difference’ to ‘ontological difference’ as a productive condition of intersubjectivity. Yet, as always in Sāṃkhya, liberation is the perception of materiality as different from consciousness, and this perception causes materiality to cease existing for that particular *puruṣa*. Nonetheless, despite liberation resting on the effective dissolution of the material, the gendered metaphysical pairing of Sāṃkhya-Yoga offers the possibility of understanding *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* in a more equal subject-subject relation rather than a subject-object one.

Further positive readings of gendered metaphysics are found in Ashton’s analysis (2020). Ashton’s reframing of Sāṃkhya dualism using Goethe’s theory of nature as ‘organic’ (spontaneous and non-systemic bursting forth) aims to rescue *prakṛti* from what he describes as a distorted commentarial portrayal as ‘inert, unintelligent matter’ (Ashton 2020: 35). Ashton’s reading leads towards a more positive interpretation of *prakṛti* as the ‘procreatrix’ and the ‘vital power of living nature’ (2020: 26), a reading clearly supported by the images of ‘maternal creativity’ (2020: 20) found at SK 39–43. However, this interpretation is not without its limitations in that it may reinforce an essentialized Romantic conception of nature as feminine as per Goethe’s lens – e.g. in the casting of *prakṛti* as ‘the surging emissions of a playful procreatress that loves to hide “in broad daylight”’ (2020: 5) or in the sexual and reproductive recasting of the relation between *puruṣa* and *mūlaprakṛti* as a ‘fertile friction’ (2020: 21), an ‘outpouring or oppositional tension’ (2020: 24) that creates manifest reality, ‘a tensional polarity whose dialectical interplay begets the living phenomenon (*vyaktaprakṛti*)’ (2020: 21). Although Ashton is rightly curious as to whether there are proto-tantric conceptions of nature in Sāṃkhya *prakṛti* that have been

overlooked, he is less explicit about the way in which this reading of *mūla-* and *vyakta-prakṛti* (primordial and manifest materiality) reflects some of the later Kashmir Śaiva Pratyabhijñā understandings of the creative relation between *śiva* as consciousness and *śakti* as the creative power of consciousness – a theisized re-envisioning that is not necessarily evident in either the *Yogasūtra* or the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*.

## The question of God

In the metaphysics of Sāṃkhya, the expression of reality is twofold: there is consciousness and there is materiality. No higher principle than these two exists – and there is no supreme or creator God. Indeed, a metaphysics in which reality is eternal and beginningless does not require a creator God to explain the engendering of the world. However, there is a concession to this idea – perhaps reflecting the growing popularity of theism in the early first millennium<sup>10</sup> – in the form of *īśvara*. The term *īśvara* meant ‘lord’ or ‘master’, but in the early first millennium was firmly assuming a theistic meaning of absolute or creator God. And yet the nature of a somewhat personified *īśvara* in the *Yogasūtra* is described in only a handful of *sūtras* (YS 1.23–1.28) and with somewhat limited attributes that make the identification of *īśvara* as a creator God highly ambivalent. *Īśvara* somehow elides the dualist metaphysics, being ‘neither *pradhāna* [primordial materiality] nor *puruṣa*’ (PYŚ 1.23). Rather, *īśvara* is a special kind of consciousness or *puruṣa* (YS 1.24), a *guru* or teacher even of the ancients (YS 1.26). It is omniscient (YS 1.25) and omnipresent (YS 1.26) – but notably not omnipotent. As *īśvara* is a special type of *puruṣa*, presumably the concept and state of consciousness is a prior principle.

***Īśvara* is that special consciousness (*puruṣa*) [which is] untouched by affliction, moral retribution (*karma*), moral maturation<sup>11</sup> and (mental) substratum.**

(PYŚ 1.24)