

Sāmkhya System of Indian Philosophy

Dr. Harish Chandra

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There are three levels of Vedic literature. At the top level are the four Vedas, regarded in orthodox Hindu tradition as God's revelations to four sages at the dawn of mankind on earth. They are called *Śruti*, "that which is heard." There is no one claiming to be the author of the Vedas. The Vedas are the ultimate authority for all topics of interest to humans—both spiritual and material topics. Over the course of time, there was a division into two branches: (a) the Upaniṣādic literature (108 Upaniṣads in all, with 10 of them considered to be the principal ones), dealing with spiritual knowledge, *ātmatattva*; and (b) the Āraṇyakas and Brāhmaṇas, dealing with the material world. Later came the third level of Vedic literature, the *darśana* or philosophical literature.

In the *darśanas*, for the first time, a new feature appears: disputations and debates. In the Vedas, there are no arguments, just statements. Likewise, in the Upaniṣads, there are no contrary views: a teacher gives advice (*upadeśa*) to his students, who listen and absorb the teaching. But in the *darśanas*, different viewpoints are considered. The *darśanas* are an argumentative body of literature. In fact, six schools of Indian philosophy developed, with differing viewpoints but all treating the Vedas as the ultimate authority. They are:

- Sāmkhya, founded by sage Kapila, of hoary antiquity.
- Yoga, founded by Sanatkumāra and Jaigisavya, with Patañjali as the author of the most ancient treatise on yoga, the *Yoga Sūtras*. Patañjali's dates are anywhere between 200 BC and 300 AD.
- Nyāya, founded by Gautama, 550 BC
- Vaiśeṣika, founded by Kaṇāda, 600 BC
- Mīmāṃsā, founded by Jaimini, 200 AD
- Vedānta, expounded by Bādarāyaṇa, author of the *Brahma-sūtras*, 500 B.C. – 200 B.C.

The six philosophical systems are generally treated in pairs: Sāmkhya and Yoga; Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika; and Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta (also called Pūrva Mīmāṃsā and Uttara Mīmāṃsā, respectively).

Three notes:

- In the Vedic worldview, matter and spirit together encompass the universe. Everywhere, there is matter and there is spirit. The Vedic sages enquired into both with equal objectivity. In fact, it can be argued that the word "science" derives from the word *Sāmkhya*. But in today's world, the two are in separate compartments. People think that the rigor of scientific enquiry needs to be applied only to the material world and that in the spiritual domain we can accept untested dogmas. That is why there is a multiplicity of religions, each with its own

particular set of dogmas, leading to religious conflicts. It is time to develop spirituality from first principles, leading to “Humanism – The New World Order – A Fusion of Science and Spirituality.” I have started to develop this thesis in the last few days and am excited by it. Note incidentally that it is fitting that this new Humanism should develop in India, given that country’s ancient tradition of treating matter and spirit on the same rigorous footing.

- The *darśanas* use a language of their own called *sūtras*, aphorisms. This is neither *mantra* nor *śloka* but an extremely terse formulation, suitable for memorization and hardly intelligible without explanation, analogous to a chemical equation. (The fact that one knows English does not mean that one will understand a chemical equation. Similarly, knowledge of Sānskrit does not guarantee that one will understand *sūtras*.)
- The *Brahma-sūtras*, the basic text of the sixth system, begins with the aphorism “Now, therefore, the enquiry into Brahman.” That the author of the text felt the need to prove the existence of Brahman is an indication of the gradual decline of belief from the time of the Vedas to the time of this text.

The Sāmkhya system derives its name from the word Samkhya, meaning enumeration or counting. As we shall see, the system is based on 25 principles or elements of reality. Of the classical texts from this school, the *Sāmkhya-pravacana Sūtra (SPS)*, which is attributed to Kapila and is of uncertain date, and *Sāmkhya-kārikā* of Īśvarakrishna (3rd century AD) are those most studied and of greatest authority. *SPS* has six chapters with a total of 525 *sūtras*. It begins with the bold statement (*SPS* I.1) *atha trividha duḥkha atyanta nivṛttir atyanta puruṣārthaḥ*: “the permanent prevention of the three kinds of pain is the supreme purpose of life.” A person capable of claiming that his analysis will permanently remove pain must have been a very great one. The three kinds of pain are: pain originating from the sufferer himself; pain caused to the sufferer by other living creatures; and suffering caused by supernatural forces.

Wisdom is the application of one’s knowledge and one uses it every moment to make choices among the innumerable options one has. Whereas animals go by their instinct, we humans use our wisdom to live our lives. Since wisdom comes from knowledge, acquisition of knowledge is important. Our intellect requires knowledge like an engine requires fuel. We should get the finest wisdom, otherwise human life is not well utilized.

The Sāmkhya system or school is noted for its evolutionary theory, which is accepted by many other Indian systems, and for its dualism. As one of the oldest philosophical schools to focus on the relationship between the pure self and the empirical self, it is unsure whether this school grew out of certain portions of the Upaniṣads or developed independently of them. The dualism of Sāmkhya rests on two fundamental categories: *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* or subject and object. All experience is based on the duality of the knowing subject (*puruṣa*) and the known object (*prakṛti*).

Puruṣa (which literally means “person”) is consciousness. It includes both the tiny consciousness that the soul is, residing within the cover of the body, and the infinite, cosmic consciousness, residing in the cosmos (*Brahmāṇḍa*). *Prakṛti* (which literally means “nature”) is the basis of all objective existence, physical and psychical. The knower is *puruṣa* (the soul), the known is *prakṛti*. *Puruṣa* is consciousness, *prakṛti* is non-conscious. *Puruṣa* is inactive, *prakṛti* active. *Puruṣa* is unchangeable, *prakṛti* is changeable. *Puruṣa* is devoid of the three *guṇas* (see next paragraph), *prakṛti* is characterized by them. *Puruṣa* is subject, *prakṛti* object. The objective of Sāṃkhya is that we should acquire *puruṣa-prakṛti vivek*, that is, the wisdom to discriminate between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, between spirit and matter. We can also say that one objective of Sāṃkhya is to theoretically explain meditation, something which allows a practitioner to go deeper within oneself and see one's own self separate from and deeper than various inner constructs such as mind, ego, and intellect.

As the changing object, *prakṛti* is the source of the world of becoming. In it all determinate existence is implicitly contained. It is pure potentiality. It is not being but force, a state of tension of the three constituents or *guṇas*: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. In Sāṃkhya terminology, the *guṇas* are not qualities but constituents. Just as white light has seven colors as components, *prakṛti* is, so to speak, a string made of three strands. *Sattva* is potential consciousness; *rajas* is the source of activity, and *tamas* is the source of that which resists activity. They produce pleasure, pain, and indifference, respectively. *Sattva* represents whatever is fine and light; *rajas* whatever is active; and *tamas* whatever is coarse or heavy. When the three elements are held in equipoise, there is no action. When there is a disturbance of the equilibrium, the process of evolution begins.

All things, as products of *prakṛti*, consist of the *guṇas* in different proportions. The varied interaction of these *guṇas* accounts for the diversity of the world in its material as well as its mechanical aspects. Even a fruit such as mango or the time of day has the *guṇas*. In good natural surroundings, such as a mountain slope or a river bank, *sattva* grows. Our ancient sages studied the effect of various kinds of food on the subtle body and concluded that milk and fruits are predominantly *sāttvic*; bitter, sour, salty, pungent foods, including meat and eggs, are *rājasic*; and stale, dry, bad smelling foods, including beef, fish, eggs, wine, garlic, onions, and tobacco, are *tāmasic*.

The evolution of unconscious *prakṛti* can take place only through the presence of conscious *puruṣa*. The presence of *puruṣa* excites the activity of *prakṛti*, and, thus upsetting the equilibrium of the *guṇas* in *prakṛti*, passively starts the evolutionary process. The union of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* is compared to a lame man of good vision mounted on the shoulders of a blind man of sure foot.

The development of this process of evolution follows a law of succession. *Mahat* (literally, “the great” or “the great one”) is the first product of this evolutionary process. It is the basis of the intelligence (*buddhi*) of the individual. *Mahat* brings out the cosmic aspect, and *buddhi* the psychological counterpart of *mahat* in the individual. *Buddhi* is not *puruṣa*, the self. It is the intellect, the subtle substance of all mental processes, which

tells us what is and what is not. *Ahamkāra* or self-sense, which develops out of *buddhi*, is the principle of individualization.

Three different lines of development arise from *ahamkāra*. From its *sattva* aspect arises *manas* (the mind); from its *rajas* aspect arise the five organs of knowledge (*jñānendriya*) and the five organs or instruments of action (*karmendriya*); and from its *tamas* aspect arise the five fine or subtle elements (*tanmātra*). From these the five gross elements (*pañcabhūta*) develop by a preponderance of the quality of *tamas*. The five *jñānendriyas* are the organs of sound (*śrotra*, ear), touch (*tvak*, skin), sight (*caḥṣu*, eye), taste (*jihvā*, tongue), and smell (*ghrāṇa*, nose). The five *karmendriyas* are the organs of manipulation (*hastha*), locomotion (*pāda*), speech (*vāk*), excretion (*pāyu*), and procreation (*upastha*). The five *tanmātras* are the essences of sound, touch, taste, and smell. The five gross elements are space (*ākāśa*), air (*vāyu*), fire (*agni*), water (*jala*), and earth (*pṛthivī*). Though traceable to one and the same source (*prakṛti*), each sense and each element functions differently owing to the difference of the collocation of the *guṇas* in them.

The gross elements originate from the five *tanmātras* as follows. From *śabda-tanmātra* emerges *ākāśa* with sound as its manifest quality. From *śabda-tanmātra* and *sparśa-tanmātra* combined emerges air, which therefore has the two qualities of sound and touch; from these two and *rūpa-tanmātra* springs fire, which has the three qualities of sound, touch, and color; from these three and *rasa-tanmātra* emerges water with four qualities, viz. sound, touch, color, and taste; and last, earth comes into being from all five *tanmātras* (the above four plus *gandha-tanmātra*) and is therefore characterized by all the five qualities of sound, touch, color, taste, and smell. The elements beginning with *ākāśa* are consequently more and more concrete. Each element is conceived as manifold, and consists of finite and disparate particles. It is out of these atoms that the whole of the physical universe as known to us is produced.

The above scheme indicates only what we may describe as primary evolution. Evolution does not stop there. It goes further on as is shown, for example, when *pṛthivī* is transformed into a tree or a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. This secondary evolution is in fact what we are familiar with and what takes place within any single period of evolution. When an object that has evolved in this sense breaks up, it is reduced to the form of the gross elements and the process of dissolution does not extend beyond except when the evolutionary period in question itself comes to an end. At the end of each *kalpa* or cycle of creation, which is supposed to occur periodically, breakup involves dissolution into the original *prakṛti*. In summary: Creation is the unfolding of the different effects from the original *prakṛti* and destruction is the dissolution of them into the original *prakṛti*.

Prakṛti and its products are unconscious. They cannot discriminate between themselves and *puruṣa*. The individual is not body, life, or mind, but the informing self, silent, peaceful, eternal. The self is pure spirit. If it were liable to change, knowledge would be impossible. By the light of *puruṣa*'s consciousness, we become conscious of *prakṛti*. *Buddhi*, *ahankāra*, and *manas* are the instruments of consciousness and are not

themselves conscious. As there are many conscious beings in the world, the Sāmkhya adopts the view of the plurality of selves, both in the condition of bondage and in that of release.

The empirical self, the *jīva*, is the self limited by the body and the senses. It is a member of the natural world. Each ego possesses, within the gross material body which suffers dissolution at death, a subtle body formed of the psychical apparatus, including the senses. These subtle bodies are products of *prakṛti* and possess the three *guṇas*. The empirical self is thus the composite of free spirit and *prakṛti*, where the *puruṣa* forgets its true nature and is deluded into the belief that it thinks, feels, and acts. *Buddhi*, by means of the reflection of *puruṣa* which is adjacent to it, becomes the reality of its form and experiences the object. Though neither *puruṣa* nor *buddhi* by itself can serve as the subject (for the former remains external to everything and the latter, being derived from *prakṛti*, is non-sentient), they do so together, the *buddhi* contributing all the activity involved in it and the *puruṣa* the element of awareness (*caitanya*).

Salvation in the Sāmkhya system is only phenomenal, for the true self is always free. Bondage is the activity of *prakṛti* toward one not possessing discrimination, that is, the knowledge of the distinction of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. Release is the inactivity of *prakṛti* toward one possessing discriminate knowledge. Freedom consists in the removal of the obstacle that hinders the full manifestation of the light of *puruṣa*. Freedom is obtained by discriminative knowledge, but it is not theoretical. It is the result of the practice of virtue and *yoga*. The Yoga system, comprises, as it were, the practical side of the Sāmkhya-Yoga philosophy; it enunciates and elaborates the practical methods which lead to discriminative knowledge and thus to release.

The 25 elements or “particles” of Sāmkhya can now be counted. As stated earlier, the modifications (*vikāra* or *vṛtti*) of *prakṛti*, starting from being nearest to farthest from the *puruṣa*, are: *mahat* (intellect), *ahankāra* (ego-sense), *manas* (mind), five organs of knowledge, five organs of action, five subtle elements, and five gross elements. *Mahat* is the first particle; before *mahat*, there are only *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* in creation. We may imagine that the Supreme Lord does *tapas* (austerities), which makes the transformation of *prakṛti* into an ocean of *mahat* particles. Including *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, we thus have a total of 25 elements.

It is important to note that most of the terms used above, while they may seem familiar words, in fact have special meanings in Sāmkhya. For example, *caṅsu* does not refer to the eye but to the organ in the subtle body that can apprehend *rūpa* (shape, form, and color); the *rūpa* is processed by the *rūpa tanmātra* and transmitted through the optic nerves to the point where the “eye” meets the *manas* (mind); the *manas* (which can comprehend *rūpa tanmātra*) then transmits the shape to *ahankāra*, which transmits it to *mahat*; the *mahat* cannot hold anything except momentarily, and so shows the shape to the soul (*puruṣa*). To be precise, the shape is not transferred to the *mahat* (*buddhi*) and found in it as may be supposed, but the *mahat* itself assumes the form of the object, when a suitable stimulus is received from the outside. Similarly, *hastha* is not the hand

but the organ of manipulation in the subtle body. Animals, like humans, have hands but no *hastha*.

The eleven *indriyas* or sense organs (including *manas*), *ahamkāra*, and *buddhi* constitute the psychic apparatus with which every *puruṣa* is endowed in the empirical state and assist the individual in acquiring experience. They are psychic in the sense that they lend themselves to be lighted up by the *puruṣa* unlike the other products of *prakṛti*, viz. the elements whether subtle or gross. They are the result on the part of *prakṛti* to adapt itself to the requirements of the *puruṣa*. (Instead of saying, as we ordinarily do, that we adjust ourselves to our environment, we should say here that *prakṛti* adjusts itself to our needs.) In other words, the functions that we describe as mental are really mechanical processes of physical origin, which assume a psychical character only when illumined by spirit. In internal perception such as that of pain or pleasure, as also in meditative knowledge, the process is exactly the same; only the cooperation of the external senses (*jñānendriya*) is not required and they do not therefore function then.

Kapila's picture of the human mind is intricate and involves processes at the microscopic or subatomic level. The following analogy will help us to understand his thinking. The outer world is made up of the *pañcabhūta* and the *pañca tanmātra*. The *manas* is like the TV antenna that picks up the signal of an object from this outer world, the *ahamkāra* is the recorder or memory storage device that saves the picture, the *mahat* is the TV monitor which displays the picture, and the *puruṣa* (soul) is the observer who watches the picture. The soul, disconnected though it is from the organs of sight, etc., sees the picture through its projection on *mahat*. Because there are five organs of perception, *mahat* is 5-dimensional.

It is often said that in the *Sāmkhya-pravacana Sūtra* and the *Sāmkhya-kārikā* we meet with refutation of the existence of God, that Sāmkhya is therefore atheistic, and that Kapila was an atheist. This is an erroneous view. The famous statement *īśvara-asiddheh* (*SPS* I.92) means only that God is unproven. Sāmkhya does not deny the existence of God. All that it says is that His existence cannot be proved by evidence—which is in fact the right stand, for it is faith which is necessary for belief in God, not argument. *Īśvara* is certainly unprovable as the cause of the world. Subsequent statements in *SPS*, e.g. *SPS* III.56 *sa hi sarva-vit sarva-kartā*, “For he (*Īśvara*) becomes the all-knower and the all-doer” and *SPS* III.57 *īdṛśa-īśvara-siddhiḥ siddhā*, “Such proof of an *Īśvara* is admitted (i.e. knowledge of such an *Īśvara* is proved)” also make it clear that God is not denied. To say that sage Kapila was an atheist is nonsense and is a calumny on one of the great philosopher saints of India.

To understand Kapila's viewpoint further, consider a simple man-made object such as a wooden table. The causes responsible for bringing it into existence are: (a) a log of wood; (b) a carpenter; and (c) an end-user. While (a) and (b) are obvious, (c) comes about because a carpenter would not make the table unless there were someone who will use it. The wood, void of consciousness, goes through a transformation, while the carpenter, possessing knowledge, causes the transformation without himself going

through any transformation. At the end of the process, the wooden log does not exist but the carpenter continues to exist. One is to be acted upon, the other acts. The wood is the material cause, *upādāna kāraṇam*, the carpenter is the efficient (or intelligent) cause, *nimitta kāraṇam*, and the end-user is the hidden (or first) cause. Applying this logic to the process of creation as conceived by Sāṃkhya, we see that *prakṛti* is the material cause, *puruṣa* is the efficient cause, and worldly experience (*bhoga*) or release (*apavarga*) is the hidden cause. Kapila's statement *īśvara-asiddheh* is to be understood in the context of *upādāna kāraṇam* – God is not the material cause. (The Vedāntic viewpoint, by contrast, is that, in creation, the efficient cause can only be non-separate from creation and the material cause.)

Note, by the way, that both *bhoga* and *apavarga* are outside the sphere of *prakṛti* and both have reference to the self. This does not mean, however, that the final aim of evolution is two-fold. *Apavarga* or escape means the restoration of the self once for all to its natural condition. *Prakṛti* evolves for bringing about its release in this sense, and it ceases to do so for a self when that particular self becomes free. Therefore *apavarga* is the only true aim of evolution. We may look upon the other aim of *bhoga* as its necessary antecedent. The hidden cause is the most important of the causes and in one sense it may be said to be the only cause, for in its absence there would be no progressive movement at all in *prakṛti*. We should also note that this view of causation holds solely within the sphere of *prakṛti* and its transformations. The self, in reality, remains untouched by it. It is neither a cause nor an effect of anything.

Let us turn now to Yoga. The word “yoga” has become well known in the west. There are literally hundreds of thousands of self-help books, DVDs, tapes, etc that claim to be some form of yoga or other. One common thread that links all of this stuff together, and, perhaps to its original meaning, is the notion that you are doing something when practicing yoga. Even if you are breathing and controlling your breathing, you are doing something.

The first or foundational work on yoga comes from the 2nd century BCE thinker Patañjali, the author of the *Yoga Sūtra (YS)*. Yoga is discrimination between subject and object, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, which means the establishment of the self in its purity. You will achieve this discrimination only when you know yourself. We are always functioning like the body-mind-intellect complex. The mind (*citta*) provides the crucial link between body and soul. To know yourself, you have to keep the mind blank, and that is the objective of yoga. The mind is like a television screen or a mirror; when it is blank, the viewer will see himself, his *svarūp*, which is self realization, whereas, when the screen is turned on, all he sees is the television picture. Yoga, according to Patañjali, is a methodical effort to attain perfection, through the control of the different elements of human nature, physical and psychical. He defines yoga in *YS* I.2: *yogaś-citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*, “the restraint of the modifications of the mind is yoga.”

The main interest of Patañjali is not metaphysical theorizing, but the practical motive of indicating how salvation can be attained by disciplined activity. The Yoga system accepts

the Sāmkhya psychology and metaphysics. However, it is definitely more theistic than the Sāmkhya, as evidenced by the addition of god ("*puruṣa viśeṣa*") to the Sāmkhya's twenty-five elements of reality.

What the Sāmkhya call *mahat* or *buddhi* is called *citta* (mind-stuff) in the Yoga system. It undergoes modifications when it is affected by objects through the senses. The consciousness of *puruṣa* reflected in *citta* gives rise to the impression that it is the experiencer. *Citta* is really the spectacle of which the self is by reflection the spectator. We have as many *cittas* as there are selves. The ego is different from the self and is dependent on the experience of the world. The life of the ego is restless and unsatisfied, being subject as it is to the five afflictions of (1) ignorance or the mistaking of the non-eternal for the eternal, (2) the erroneous identification of oneself with the instruments of body and mind, (3) attachment to pleasant things, (4) hatred of unpleasant things, and (5) the instinctive love of life and the dread of death. When the self is freed from *citta* it withdraws itself into its own pure nature.

The special feature of the Yoga system is its practical discipline, by which the suppression of mental states is brought about through the practice of spiritual exercises and the conquest of desire. The Yoga gives us the eightfold method of abstention, observance, posture, breath-control, withdrawal of the senses, fixed attention, contemplation, and concentration. The first two of these refer to the ethical prerequisites for the practice of *yoga*. We should practice non-violence, truthfulness, honesty, continence, and non-acceptance of gifts. We should observe purification (internal and external), contentment, austerity, and devotion to god. Posture is a physical aid to concentration. Breath-control aids serenity of mind. Abstraction of the senses from their natural function helps to keep the mind still. These five steps are indirect or external means to yoga. In fixed attention we get the mind focused on a particular object. Contemplation or meditation leads to concentration. Yoga is identified with concentration (*samādhi*), where the self regains its eternal and pure free status. This is the meaning of freedom or release or salvation in the Yoga system.

Although Sāmkhya and Yoga are separate systems, one can readily see their connection to one another and to the thought found in the *Gītā*. It is not surprising that, in spite of their differences, these schools are seen as linked.

We conclude by noting that Kapila in his *Sāmkhya-pravacana Sūtra* has already covered most of the ground covered by the authors of the five later systems of Indian philosophy. In fact, the first statement that Patañjali makes in *Yoga Sūtra* is that what he has to say is *anūsāsanam* and not *śāsanam* ("after-teaching" and not "teaching"). Sāmkhya has the same concept of *āsanam* as Yoga (compare *SPS* VI.24: "posture is whatever is steady and easeful" with *YS* II.46) and its definition of meditation (*SPS* VI.25: *dhyānam nir-viṣayam manas*, "mind without an object is meditation") is more direct than the one in *Yoga Sūtras* (*YS* III.2: "*Dhyāna* is the continuous flow of cognition toward that object").