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Bhartṛhari's linguistic philosophy: Śabda Brahman and the question from Ineffability

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Abstract

Bhartṛhari mainly focuses on correct interpretation of Vedic literature through grammar and creates the notion of verbal holism, which describes the ultimate reality as a universal language (śabda) without any components. According to his philosophy, śabda is absolute reality, and the universe expresses itself in the shape of language; that is, objective reality is nothing more than the linguistic explanation of any kind of experience. We can only know something if we are able to cognise it verbally, whether in mind or orally. There is, nevertheless, a sense of ineffability, and there are experiences that do not fit within the realm of linguistic cognition and can only be described in terms of raw sensations. As a result, Bhartṛhari's philosophical argument that absolute reality only exists in a word form, i.e. Śabda Brahman, is called into doubt. The paper briefly discusses the scope of ineffability in verbal holism, as well as some alternative remedies from other philosophical traditions, in order to keep the notion of effability alive in Bhartṛhari's Śabda Brahman theory.

Keyword: Śabda Brahman, grammar, verbal holism, ineffability

Introduction

In his book Vākyapadiya, Bhartṛhari, a prominent grammarian as well as a notable Indian linguistic philosopher, expanded on the analytical element of language and established grammar as a philosophical system. As a result, what we term grammar (Vyākaraṇa) may be a direct experience of ultimate truth rather than only intellectual conviction. Correct speech, which is based on knowledge of grammar, not only transmits meaning but also allows one to see reality. As a result, every idea or experience may be expressed through language (śabda), and this feeling of effability serves as the cornerstone of Bhartṛhari's linguistic philosophy, which states that the word is the world; Śabda Brahman.

The two reductionist errors of western modern language theorising appear to have been avoided by Indian philosophers of language. They did not reduce language to a purely human convention with only scientific or factual referents, nor did they make the mistake of metaphysical reductionism, which devalues the meanings of human words to the point that language becomes opaque mysticism^[1]. In a similar fashion Bhartṛhari's Vākyapadiya begins with a philosophical enquiry into the nature and origin of language in connection to Brahman, the ultimate reality, but then moves on to technical grammatical problems involved in everyday language use. In a similar vein, this paper will first present a metaphysical explanation of Bhartṛhari's Śabda Brahman theory, followed by some issues concerning the essential nature of this theory, namely effability, which is an unconditional capability of verbal expression, whether in the form of thoughts or speech. For a greater comprehension of the latter, the former must first be explained.

A Metaphysical Explanation of Śabda Brahman

Bhartṛhari methodically linked Brahman (the Absolute) with language (Śabda) in Vākyapadiya 1.1, arguing that everything else originates as a manifestation of Śabda Brahman, and therefore reality is effable via language. Brahman and language are linked in the Vedic texts far earlier.

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¹ Harold G. Coward and K. Kunjunni Raja, The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Volume 5: The Philosophy of the Grammarians, pp. 33

In Rig Veda 10.71, it is said that not everyone perceives Brahman's manifestations in language equally. The ṛsis, or 'seers,' who have cleansed themselves, experience the entire expression of language. Others, whose ignorance has clouded their thoughts and sense organs, hear just a fraction of what language has to offer. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.1.2 identifies Brahman as the one reality, without a second, that is equivalent to language. Scholars of Vyākaraṇa have concentrated on Vedas and Upaniṣads that connect language, Brahman, and absolute truth. Passages that say otherwise are skipped over or disregarded^[2].

According to Bhartṛhari, the entire universe derives its meaning from the Brahman, which has no origin or end (anādi-nidhanam) is all-pervading, and whose very essence is speech, and is hence referred to as Śabda-Brahman. It is the principle that exists outside of all mental constructs, and while its expression seems to be time and spatially organised, it is unaffected. This manifestation should be interpreted in a linguistic sense, with Brahman being seen as a perpetual syllable. This manifestation has the appearance of a bubble. It has the ability to return to its source. The meaning of the word manifests itself, and this meaning is the entire universe. Śabda Brahman is a one, universal, and absolute form of truth (sat), yet owing to its strength (śakti), it appears as many. This power looks to be distinct from Sabda Brahman, however this is not the case. The universal and the specific are same; they only appear to be distinct when they take on various forms.

The indestructible powers of Sabda Brahman functioning through the powers of Time become the six modifications; birth (jāyate), existence (asti), transformation (vipariṇamate), growth (vardhate), decay (apakṣīyate), destruction (vinaśyati) are the source of the different states of life. These modifications depend on time (kālaśakti) which is the power of Brahman. Other powers depend on the independent power of time. These modifications have sequential occurrences. This sequence is marked with the scale of time. Through this process the circle of existence works. The single seed of all things manifest through different characteristics of life; experience (bhoktr), experienced (bhoktā) and experience (bhoga). The one Śabda Brahman is the substratum of powers. Bhartṛhari establishes Grammar as the subject which not only helps to get the correct knowledge of vedic words and as well as laukika (language in general), as the greatest way to attain salvation (mokṣa). According to grammarians, words convey meaning. Now the problem is where does this meaning reside? or what is the substratum of meaning? The meaning can reside on letters, but letters are perishable. The meaning which is eternal cannot stay in the perishable object. To comprehend a word, each and every letter is necessary. It is not the case that from the first letter itself the meaning is comprehended, then other letters of the word would be redundant. If it is said that the arrangement of letters holds the meaning, then there would be a question of how an arrangement of perishable objects can become eternal. Because in a word letters come one by one, and when once a letter is uttered and destroyed then only another letter could come into existence. Considering these issues grammarians postulate a meaning bearing entity, other than word (pada) and the letter (varṇa). This entity is called sphoṭa. The sphoṭa is eternal and according to the grammarians, the sphoṭa is Śabda. This Śabda, its meaning and their relation is eternal (nitya). The term sphoṭa is explained as *sphuṭyate arthah yasmāt* i.e from which meaning has blossomed.

For Bhartṛhari, the sentence and the sentence's meaning are indivisible units. Communication takes place through sentences only, not by individual words. Whereas Mimāṃsikas stand on in different ways. According to them, the sentence is a collection (saṅghata) of words. A word which is outside of a sentence has a certain meaning. When it enters in a sentence it conveys the same meaning, neither more nor less. The words get-together and lead to a sentential meaning. This sentential meaning is a new meaning, over and above the meanings of the individual world. This meaning is called *samsarga*, which means mutual connection. Like the number ten exists in all the ten objects which are counted, taken together, not in each of them. The word meaning is universal, capable of denoting all particulars. In the presence of other words, the meaning becomes restricted to one single particular. In that state it is called sentence meaning. Some think that the verb is the sentence, the verb denotes action. The accomplishment of the action is also comprehended from the verb. Thus the meaning is completed. So the verb can be considered as a sentence.

But for Bhartṛhari, the sentence is indivisible. It can be divisible when it is manifested through utterance. But before manifestation, it resides in the speaker's mind as an indivisible, complete entity. According to him the meaning is comprehended in a flash of understanding of the meaning of the whole sentence. It is quite different from the meaning of individual words. This flash or intuition is described as pratibhā. It connects together the meanings conveyed by the different words of a sentence. It relates the sentence as a whole on which it rests. It exists in animals also, because of this pratibhā the birds and the animals engage in their natural activities without any instruction. Pratibhā is traceable in various aspects of human life, like intelligence, intuitive knowledge and the spontaneous activities of new-born babies^[3].

The chief characteristic of a sentence is the completeness. This completeness does not depend on any particular number of words in a sentence. When a verb expresses an action or process, with other words as accessories, a sentence is considered to be complete. Though, to serve practical purposes Bhartṛhari accepts the splitting of sentences. But according to him these parts are not real, they are all imaginable. Therefore, the nature of the sentence is whole. Though the meaning of a sentence and its form have an external aspect, they are actually inner qualities. They are derived from the Śabda Brahman; absolute reality and the verbal holism. They themselves are a spark of Śabda Brahman which represents the total knowledge. The meaning is manifested and revealed; thus bringing the world into existence. However, before the meaning of a sentence is fully grasped, some other elements, such as individual words and their meanings are cognised. But they are not real. They are the means by which the final clear cognition takes place.

Language is the object of study in vyākaraṇa, yet all thinking about language must, by virtue of human limitations, be done in language itself. One cannot get outside of language so as to examine it objectively. Language must be used to study language from within. Vyākaraṇa does not draw back from this difficulty but relishes its challenge; it recognizes that, as Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, all knowledge of ourselves and

³ Iyer K.A.S, The Vākyapadiya of Bhartṛhari with the vritti (trans.), Chapter 1, pp. 109-111

² ibid., pp. 34-35

all knowledge of the world comes to us through language^[4]. Thus the correct knowledge of language is basic to all other approaches to reality and all other darshans. The Vedas occupy a primary place in the manifestation of Sabda Brahman, as well as being the means by which Sabda Brahman may be realized and released. The Veda, though One, is divided into many and spreads out through its various recensions and manifesting sounds (dhvani) to the diversity of people. Although the experience of the Vedas may be many, the reality they reveal is the one Sabda Brahman.

For Bharṭhari, Vedic language is at once the creator and sustainer of the world cycles and the revealer of the Divine. Language is taken as having Divine origin (daivi-vak), as Spirit descending and embodying itself in phenomena, assuming various guises and disclosing its truth to the sensitive soul^[5]. And therefore, language (Śabda) is taken as an ultimate principle of the manifestation of the universe.

Scope of Ineffability

There being a philosophical position that argues that our direct sensory experience has an element within it that cannot be put in words. Whatever truth may lie in this view, it is implicitly at work as the basis of many of our epistemological disputes over sensation, perception, conceptualization and knowledge. For example, some modern writers believe that when the Buddhist logicians (the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti School) define sensory perception as free from or uncontaminated by conceptual construction (kalpanā) and describe the perception of such sensory awareness as 'self-grasped' and ineffable, they make appeal to a similar fact^[6].

Although the metaphysical theory of Śabda Brahman can be grasped with our cognitive abilities to imagine the world as a manifestation of the word, how far is it considerable? Can a very personal and intensely felt experience (e.g. love, hate, acute pain, agony) be properly described or expressed in language? Are pure sensations or sensory experiences effable? Can the expression 'I am in pain' communicate exactly what it is that I feel or the Wittgenstein's notion of beetle in the box being irrelevant is justifiable?

These inquiries may well prompt other inquiries, such as if mystical understanding necessitates looking beyond the laws of logic, non-contradiction, and excluded middle? The meaning of the word 'mysticism' takes on a new depth when used in conjunction with the word 'language.' The mystical reality is considered to be beyond language; the mystic's experience is undefined and uncategorizable, and words are unable to express it. The mystics' words are inspired by a flash of inspiration, and a sympathetic feeling may be required to completely comprehend their message^[7]. The words of the mystics are generated by a flash of inspiration and a similar sympathetic feeling may be needed in order to fully grasp their message. The description of the alleged mystical experience in ordinary language, if treated as a description of just another ordinary experience, appears to be banal or even nonsensical, just as a poetic expression would appear if it were treated as a 'prosaic' description of some ordinary state of affairs. Consider this improvised version of the statement of an Indian mystic Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa: 'I am like a doll made of salt. I went to measure the depth of the ocean full of saline water. I was

dissolved completely and became one with the ocean. How can I measure the immeasurable?' Taken out of context, this story seems banal. But when it is understood in the light of its metaphysical basis, the Advaita Vedānta's thesis of the merging of the individual consciousness into the all-pervading Brahman consciousness it assumes a different and profound significance for the disciple.

Modern language philosophers have established the concept of expressibility, which states that whatever a speaker chooses to say, there is an expression in the speaker's language that can express it. Two comments related to this principle, however, are relevant. First, the principle is in some ways reminiscent of Bharṭhari's celebrated thesis that there cannot be any awareness that is not 'inter-penetrated' with words. Bharṭhari was obviously talking about natural languages. His point was that the expressibility constitutes the essence of any awareness (perceptual or otherwise) or any thought (a pratyaya). He believed that as soon as a sensory reaction penetrates the cognitive level, it also penetrates the linguistic level, although this does not mean that we always have to use explicit verbal constructions. Cognizing is 'languageing' (śabdanā) at some implicit level^[7]. Second, the principle may not imply that whatever can be said can be understood by others. For if it does, it would exclude the possibility of what Wittgenstein called a 'private' language and irrelevance of personal sensations in the shared realm of language understanding. For, obeying a rule, as Wittgenstein puts it, 'is a practice' and therefore one cannot follow a rule privately.

While Dignāga-Dharmakīrti thesis about the non-verbalizable element in one's perceptual (sensory) experience would regard verbalization or description by language to be a sort of distortion of what is experienced; that is, the direct object of experience is put under a theoretical construct which contaminates, as it were, its pristine purity^[8]. However, the experience might have been verbalised in Buddhist philosophy, if the doctrine of momentariness was ignored. Even Bharṭhari acknowledges the possibility of nonverbal sensory responses. In fact, he uses the example of a man who swiftly walks along a rural path and experiences nonverbal tactile sensations from the grass^[9].

The general point so far analysed has been that our language or the conceptual system of mankind is limited in the sense that not every thing which is knowable is 'sayable' within it. This is quite acceptable to an Indian Vedāntin for whom the Brahman experience is ineffable, or even to some Buddhists for whom the pure, translucent, nirvānic consciousness is such that the subject-object duality will completely disappear in it; hence it is completely free from 'Verbal proliferations' prapañca or 'linguistic snares'.

However, the same notion runs straight against the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school's core theory, which states that whatever is knowable (prameya or jñeya) is 'sayable' (abhidheya). Naiyāyikas put too much faith in the expressive power of language. For instance, we can assume that for every language there is a concept or a series of concepts, not expressible in that language. However, we do feel that we know and therefore can somehow express these concepts that our present language cannot express, and it is still possible

⁷ ibid. p. 144, For more detailed explanation, see ch. 11- Translation and Bharṭhari's Concept of Language (Śabda), ch. 12- Cognition and Language of 'The Word and the World'

⁸ ibid., p.145

⁹ Iyer K.A.S., The Vākyapadiya of Bharṭhari with the vritti (trans.), Chapter 1, Verse I.124

⁴ Harold G. Coward and K. Kunjuni Raja, The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Volume 5: The Philosophy of the Grammarians, p.34

⁵ ibid., p.35

⁶ Bimal Krishna Matilal, The Word and the World, India's Contribution to the Study of Language, p.143

that a natural language can be deemed to express a significant portion (if not all) of its own semantics. This might explain the guiding intuition that a natural language is sufficiently rich to reflect almost the whole of its semantics. And the fact is that our natural languages are not closed systems, they are 'creatively employable', they grow like living organisms, and they are self-referential, and hence the alleged inadequacy can be mended.

While, it was Bhartṛhari who said that there is no expressive word in our language for the word-object relation. This might be interpreted as asserting that this relation can only be shown but not said in our language. This is particularly intriguing because Bhartṛhari himself explicitly propounded the strong thesis that we cannot be properly aware of something without the 'interpenetration' of word into it; in other words, if there is no expressive word, there is no proper awareness. It is however still logically compatible to contend that there may be ineffable objects but we cannot cognize such objects even if they exist, and if we somehow become aware of such an object it would be in some way effable, although something else may still be ineffable^[10].

A well-established philosophical tradition in Jainism where the word 'avaktavya' ineffable or inexpressible, is systematically interpreted as the simultaneous application of the contradictory truth predicates to a metaphysical proposition, saying 'yes' and 'no' or, 'it is' and 'it is not' at the same time in the same breath and in the same sense. For example 'John does not drink' can be affirmed when it means that John does not take alcoholic beverages, but denied when it means drinking ordinary (non-alcoholic) beverages, water, etc. This will be, for the Jainas, a combined affirmation and denial. For the Jainas, the 'ineffable' is a separate unitary truth-like predicate. The truth-value here, we may say, can be shown but not said in the language. The expression 'ineffable' is only an indicator. This seems to be an admission that a contradiction in the strictest logical sense cannot be expressed in our natural language. No one can utter 'yes' and 'no' at the same time to have the same effect^[11].

Advaita Vedāntins accept Brahman as the ultimate Reality and deduce the logical solution of other problems of their philosophy on the basis of their holistic conception of Brahman. Opposite to them, Bhartṛhari aims at explaining the world of communication by taking it as a cognitive problem, and, then, he accepts sabda-brahman as the Ontological substratum of the cognition revealed by language in communication. The language principle, according to him, is known by inference or by implication made on the basis of beings revealed in the mind by language. As per his metaphysical speculations on the Reality of the language-principle, it seems right to say that Reality for him, is an all-pervading consciousness, ubiquitously and eternally existent in all forms of Being and becoming as their very soul^[12]. However, Bhartṛhari is sometimes noted for developing a metaphysics in which language is the reality of the world, but is projected from an ineffable source^[13]. The answer to this objection can be another way of communicating or presenting. The 'Neti Neti' technique, also known as negative dialectics, is another means of conveying or presenting what is normally ineffable. The basic meaning of the word 'Neti' is 'No!' A number of Upaniṣadic texts dealing with Brahman can

be cited as an example to this method. In Yajñavalkya's description, Brahman is an experience in which the subject-object duality fully dissolves and melts into a oneness, negating all characterizations assigned from a dualist perspective. Śāṅkarācārya says that, while the truth or the Universal Soul or Brahman can be determined in a variety of ways, the final conclusion is made by saying 'not this' and 'not that,' i.e., by excluding all other potential characterizations.

Conclusion

There may be other ways to express the ineffable, but language contains untested or previously unknown tools to express ineffable. With these instruments, a creative and brilliant author, a mystic-poet, may easily explore unknown regions and experiment with such devices. They would then be able to effectively express or convey the message, eliminating the need to throw up one's hands in despair. This, I feel, is the heart of Bhartṛhari's exposition of his Śabda Brahman philosophy. His linguistic holism truly encompasses the truth of the world on the inside as well as the outside. And, even with the most hazy explanations, we can always express the so-called ineffable.

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¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.149, see chapter 12 of the 'The Word and the World'

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 151-152

¹² Tiwari.D.N: The Central Problems of Bhartṛhari's Philosophy, p.45

¹³ Scharfstein, Ben-Ami, Ineffability: the failure of words in philosophy and religion, p.70