

Sāṅkhya's 'Puruṣa-Prakṛti Relationship': An unsolved quest

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Abstract

There has been an academic quest to know about Sāṅkhya's dualistic theory: relationship of Puruṣa and Prakṛti. Undoubtedly, Sāṅkhya is one of the orthodox systems in Indian knowledge traditions. It believes on the existence of God, doctrine of rebirth, doctrine of Karma, liberation etc. Moreover, it is also very much positivist in its attitude. Whether Sāṅkhya used in the sense of right knowledge in the Bhagavat-Gītā or not, has to be examined. What is knowledge? What is right for me may not be the same for others. Then, in what context we give our judgment as right? According to Saint Kapila, Sāṅkhya means right knowledge of the separation of Puruṣa from Prakṛti. If both are independent realities, what is the requirement of separation? If Prakṛti is the first cause, un-caused cause of everything, then in the first instance where Puruṣa came? Is it the by-product of Naturalism? Who produced first Puruṣa? Who required him/her? Can Prakṛti called as matter (same of Cārvāka's Matter?), and Puruṣa as mind, or something else?

The paper tries to understand the Sāṅkhya's 'Puruṣa-Prakṛti Relationship'; relationship of Mind and matter in general and Soul and Nature in particular, the status of Guṇas in the world evolution process.

Key Words: Sankshya, Purusha, Prakrti, Karma, Naturalism, Mind, Soul, Matter, Nature.

Introduction

According to Saint Kapila, Sāṅkhya means right knowledge of the

separation of Puruṣa from Prakṛti. If both are independent realities, what is the requirement of 'saying' separation? If it is required, then who separate, and from whom? If Prakṛti is the first cause, un-caused cause of everything, then in the first instance where Puruṣa came? Is it the by-product of Naturalism? Who produced first Puruṣa? Who required him/her? In what context we believed that we can make our own destiny? Can Prakṛti called as matter (same of Cārvāka's Matter?), and Puruṣa as mind, or something else? There has been an academic quest to know about Sāṅkhya's dualistic theory: relationship of Puruṣa and Prakṛti. This is also to know the relationship of Mind/soul and matter/nature. The paper tries to understand the Sāṅkhya's 'Puruṣa-Prakṛti Relationship'; relationship of Mind and matter in general and Soul and Nature in particular, the status of Guṇas in the world evolution process.

In Sāṅkhya, Puruṣa and Prakṛti are two independent realities of the Universe. Puruṣa is a medium for consciousness to manifest itself in matter. And from that contrast, the union takes place as of the halt and blind. By that union a creation is framed. The closest point of union between Puruṣa and Prakṛti is the ego. By 'ego' means consciousness with pride. 'I' alone preside and has power over all that is perceived and known, and all these objects of sense are for my use. Mind and Matter are in one sense independent and in another sense mutually dependent. Prakṛti may exist without being influenced by Puruṣa; as pure soul, Puruṣa may exist without influencing, or being influenced by Prakṛti. Mind is like a mirror and only reflecting individual Prakṛti is to say that the mirror is not influenced or affected by its image. Pure soul reflecting is different from pure soul not reflecting. Hence, according to Sāṅkhya view, Prakṛti does influence Puruṣa. If Sāṅkhya says these two entities are completely independent and, in another sense, they mutually affect each other. If Puruṣa equal 'soul-thought' and Prakṛti equal 'matter', where soul-thought and matter are Cartesian notion of Mind-body dualism. For

Sāṅkhya, soul and matter are radically different and cannot be placed together in the combination of soul-knowledge. Knowledge is a function of mind and intellect, whereas according to Sāṅkhya, the soul divorced from mind and intellect.

The ideas of oneness of nature in Indian Philosophy can be classified into three main themes. The first of these themes is based on the substantive oneness of matter across all creation or cosmos, a view that explains the unified origin and composition of the natural world. How is a matter substantively one or seen as a whole? Another second stream of thinking explains the process of diversification and differences in the order of creation using different concepts such as the three Guṇas of Sāṅkhya, different realms of beings, or combination of aggregates. A third view looks at the idea of a world of interrelations between all beings and the environment wherein a moral oneness is possible. In the Sāṅkhya philosophy, nature as phenomenal existence, is not limited to the physical, but includes mental and intentional contents of the mind. Further, these traditions do not metaphysically set the humans apart from the rest of the existence.

In Indian Philosophy, these two interpretations of ecology are united. It has been repeated many times by the sages and seers of the Ṛig Veda that there is one universal consciousness which unites nature and man. Just as man without nature is an abstraction, so also nature without man is an abstraction. There cannot be universal consciousness restricted only to man or to nature. The oneness of the Brahman or the consciousness is a distinctive type of oneness. This oneness according to them is “one in the manner that indivisible, homogeneous, quality-less substance is one”. This is the difference which makes it difficult for a conceptual equivalent between ideas in holistic ecology and the Vedanta worldview.

Explaining this metaphysical idea further, we found that nature is a

structured, differentiated whole; it is the schools of Sāṅkhya and Yoga which have the concept of Prakṛti constituted by the three guṇas as systemic and internally relational. “Whether in Sāṅkhya or Advaita Vedānta, the cosmo-centric vision is intended to shape our place in reality and to regulate our conduct not with an exclusivist principle of human autonomy, but in tune with cosmic order” Just like the idea of nature, Prakṛti is also treated as a category “whole”. Prakṛti is not a sum of its parts, guṇas. The “whole to constituents” relationship is co-constitution rather than a sum. The Sāṅkhya dualism is very different from other kinds of dualism as seen in the paradigms of Western thought. Where “nature” (from a Western perspective) is incapable of serving purposes of liberation, the manifestation of Prakṛti can be used by living beings for obtaining liberation. We find here again the link between the moral or transcendental realm of matter and the ideal of Prakṛti. Sāṅkhya philosophy emphasises that Prakṛti is the matrix of the whole psycho-physical universe. Prakṛti which is co-constituted by the guṇas is defined by the process of evolution. Prakṛti as pradhāna is the cause of all effects including the phenomenal world. The idea of nature as being a creation is covered by a universal moral law or an order that determines a set of relations and consequences of activities is found in various doctrines of Indian philosophy beginning with the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā school. Nature as a moral principle that is linked to the actions of human beings and other organisms.

The moral principle Ṛta as described in the Vedas and clarifies that from a law that governed planetary movements and the duties of the various Gods, Ṛta evolved into a principle of moral action and righteousness, its meaning taking on a similarity with “truth”. Nature, in Indian thought, is conceptualized as a combination of “organic”—which consists of the embodied organisms and “extra-organic” components which is the environment—being governed by a single law that has been referred to in various philosophical schools as Ṛta,

karma, apūrva or adṛṣṭa. This law is a moral law that is impersonal, independent of a concept of a god and it maintains the order in the universe as an ordained. The conceptualizations of nature in Indian thought are linked to the relationships between the human beings and the Loka that they occupy both metaphysically and morally. The Indian philosophical traditions reflect this view as the conceptualization of nature in many Indian philosophical schools of thought is linked directly or indirectly to the idea of a moral law.

Prakṛti as the material principle of the Sāṅkhya School suggests that it is teleologically connected to the “enjoyment of puruṣa”, it is guided by a moral principle inherent within it. In Sāṅkhya philosophy, the conceptualization of nature as Prakṛti constituted by guṇas, gives rise to a special form of ethics that extended to the framework of human treatment of environment allows for different gradation or norms that are context based. The guṇas are regarded as the ultimate constituents of matter and primal objective entities. The guṇas are both the unifying and the diversifying principle that constitute nature as Prakṛti. Prakṛti contains the opposing constituents—sattva and tamas—and yet they are reconciled by rajas. So the guṇas both create divisions and differences and still maintain unity. These as “substance cum evaluative” existents, provide a foundation for the internal relatedness amongst everything that “is”. We can say that the guṇas in some way are essential, in the sense that they are the metaphysical basis of creation, but their expressions are more like attributes, which can be subjected to judgements. The different objects of this world are endowed with different combinations of guṇas.

It is important to understand that in every context or encounter, the dispositional guṇas, which are like attributes, can change. Again, we can say that guṇas form the relationship between the predisposition, knowledge and moral action (karman). Associated with action and its

outcome, the guṇas are linked to rebirth and liberation, as well as the ability to change one's predisposition for the morally better. The guṇas are associated with ethical values (i.e., dharma and adharma) which determine which kind of rebirth, with knowledge and ignorance which determine liberation and bondage, with detachment and attachment which determine transmigration, and with power and powerlessness, which determine degree of control. The central point of the above argument is that it is only human beings who are capable of action as karma; all action is inspired by the dominance of one guṇa or the other, bringing all of the actions under the judgment of a moral kind. This moral consideration has nothing to do with an external deserving of the object of moral consideration, but with the moral imperative, the predisposition—inner guṇa —of a moral agent. In fact, Sāṅkhya philosophy insists that except the Puruṣa (consciousness), who has non-agency (akartṛtva), all other forms of neutrality or inaction involve maintaining the body in a state of tamas that falls under the agency of action (kartṛtva). As in most Indian classical traditions of thought, though the idea of ethical behaviour has the ultimate purpose of liberation, still the norms and values related to correct behaviour based on one's place in the universe and context of one's life circumstances is encouraged. It is perhaps in the Mahābhārata, particularly in the Bhagavadgīta, that one finds a description of a detailed relationship between moral action and the guṇas.

The concepts of the guṇas of Prakṛti are very important for eco-ethical framework. The philosophy itself insists on liberation, the ethical analysis is better done at the level of guṇas than at the level of Prakṛti. The lower realm beings such as the animals have no opportunity “not to obey” their dharma. Here, the three guṇas are used as a moral framework for evaluating various kinds of activities, people, and objects using a Sāṅkhya-type of classification. The presupposition is that sattva and the development of its predominance

is closer to the goal of liberation. Here, we find that the three guṇas have been used to describe the ethical rightness of an action by indicating that those actions performed with the predominance of sattva cause pleasure; those of rajas nature result in pain, and the actions performed under the influence of the tamas result in ignorance or violence. The act of charity evaluated according to the three guṇas: A sattvic gift is one that is given at the right place and time, with the thought that it is good to make a gift, to a deserving a recipient, who cannot make a return for it. It is said to be rajasic when offered unwillingly, with the expectation of a gift in return or with an eye to some advantage. A tamasic gift is that which is improperly and insultingly offered, at the wrong place and time, to undeserving recipients according to Sāṅkhya, no action is free of any guṇas at any time. Even the most noblest of sattvic action will also be mixed with the other two guṇas.

This is the impact of tāmasika part of the action. The guṇa accounts in the Bhagavad-Gīta suggest that the predominance of certain guṇas at certain times influence behaviour and action. On the other hand, certain actions themselves induce the development of particular guṇas. Through this explanation, the gap between attitude and action, disposition and behaviour (in Indian thought) becomes relationally cyclical. Guṇas become a bridge between the internal mindintentions and actions performed in the external world; they are the link between the action and its effects and between beings and their worlds. This ethical framework is interesting because though in some sense the guṇas are constituents of the human being, a person has the ability to change the predominant nature using free will and actions. In other words, a rājasika person can also perform an action that is Sāttvika. By repeated performances of such acts, the internal nature becomes Sāttvika.

The triguṇa perspective gives us a related framework to evaluate our actions in a graded manner. We can say that it gives us a framework

for weightage of values rather than a mere moral significance of them. Extending this triṅgaṇa-inspired action hypothesis to the environment, one can say that those actions which are about the protection of the environment (we can call them “eco-friendly”) and lead to pleasure, joy, and good of all concerned are Sāttvika. These would be actions performed with responsibility, restraint, and care, which would lead to a fulfilled life on our planet. Those actions that are exploitative towards nature, purely aimed at creating maximum economic benefits at the cost of other beings are rājasika, and such actions would lead to short-term pleasure and long-term pain. Human actions that are today popularly called “development” would be rājasika in nature. Building dams on rivers, mining, and utilization of natural resources are all human enterprises of economic profit and gain. Tamasic actions would be those that cause wasteful use of nature or employ violence, and are inspired by misconceptions and ignorance. These result in both needless destruction and annihilation. The categories of pollution and the destructive machinery of war come under tāmasika action, which causes only. From the injunctions given in Indian philosophy, sattva is to be nourished, rajas is to be bound, and tamas is to be destroyed. So the responses to the actions around the environment can be articulated as follows: sāttvika activities around nature can be encouraged, and rājasika activities have to be regulated and controlled by policy and law. Tāmasika activities should be totally banned or replaced by alternatives and punitive action should be taken against the perpetrators of such acts.

One of the major issues in environmental ethics has been to rethink the theological basis of human–nature relationship; particularly problematic is the division between the human being and the rest of the beings (human–non-human divide). Ethical discourses of the environment often center on discussions of inclusive moral frameworks for animals and other non-human sentient beings. As discussed earlier, the difference between humans and non-humans not only delineates “nature” from “human”, but it also has

implications for the moral philosophy. “All things in the world born moving or unmoving are from the union of the field and its knower”. Such a creation that is formed by the union of Prakṛti (nature principle) and Puruṣa (the witness principle) is pervaded by the divine in all its aspects.

Human and the Non-human; Sameness and Difference purposes called puruṣārtha. The other three goals—artha (wealth and livelihood), kāma (desire), and mokṣa (liberation)—are puruṣārthas that are unique to human beings. These three goals categorise human actions into broad spheres of human activities. To be morally appropriate, these three spheres are bound by the limiting injunctions of dharma. In a way, dharma forms the moral limits of free will represented by desire, livelihood, and spiritual aspirations. It is believed that dharma sustains the natural order of the universe. For instance, kāma, the desire for sensual experiences, is to be directed towards appropriate objects. While desire for one’s own wife is appropriate, coveting another person’s wife is discouraged. Similarly, the means to acquire wealth is determined by one’s position and role in society. The other beings do not have access to the telos of the puruṣārthas. It is these ends that make human life distinct from the lives of all other sentient beings. The theme of puruṣārthas describes the human condition, but does not completely explain the causal processes of unequal divergences. How does the kṣetrajña as the inner self of all beings acquire this variation of manifestations? In other words, how are humans born humans while other souls are born animals? This is explained using the doctrine of karma and its effects. The chance one can be born in an animal’s body or a human body is a possibility created by merits and demerits (punya and pāpa), and therefore, the texts such as the Upaniṣads also call these “lower wombs”. Within philosophical traditions that believe in transmigration of the soul or rebirth, the human body is a moral attainment that is the result of good deeds performed in previous

lifetimes. Those with karmic deficit are born as animals or non-human creatures. According to these beliefs, the animal bodies, such as other “inferior” bodies such as those of women or those born in the unprivileged castes are the sites for experiencing the effects of some moral transgressions performed in the past. Both caste- and gender-based dharmas have been a source of contention for today understands of dharma as an ethical category. This is an important area of critical enquiry. This answers the question is about the moral adequateness of dharma, and the way it is construed to differentiate between the privileged human and the non-privileged humans or non-human.

Conclusion

The privileges of being born in particular sections of society are explained according to a system of naturalized hierarchy, supported by the framework of karma as causal and dharma as limiting rights and privileges. Karma becomes causal in explaining the very deterministic hierarchies in Indian socio-cultural traditions. To be free of the effects of such moral retribution in the body is impossible within a physical body that is already bound by birth into a position in an order of hierarchy, pre-determined socio-religiously for both natural and social classes. Therefore, somewhat equally created souls are born in animal bodies because as humans in previous lifetimes they did not fulfil their moral obligations. The restitution of such transgressions cannot be made if one has an animal body because it is only the human body that can act morally. Moral agency is limited to the human sphere of activities. Within this discourse, only human bodies with the ability to perform intentional action can modify their positive or negative balance of karma. Human beings also are bound to moral agency through the sphere of dharma. Non-performance of assigned dharma can also lead to negative effects. On the other hand, karma for the non-humans such as animals is merely activity based

on their innate nature, particularly within the Veda-based philosophies. This karmic discourse of body–body difference is perhaps the most difficult to adapt to an environment ethic. But it still could form the foundation for expressing the virtue of compassion. The ethics is still normative, yet this is perhaps the only way to create some moral standpoint from the divergent body narrative. The fact that the non-privileged bodies are already in a state of retribution and in a way experiencing the effects of their previous karma, it is important for us who are human to follow the manuṣya dharma, the human duty of being compassionate to all beings.

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