

EGO-MAKING PRINCIPLE IN SAMKHYA
METAPHYSICS AND COSMOLOGY

Among the shortest philosophical questions that require the most elaborated analysis are two crucial issues in subjectivity: “Who am I?” and “What am I?”. The first stands for an anthropological search for the peculiarity of individual human nature, while the second, more general, reaches the very metaphysical basis of the subject. We could also add another inquiry that is naturally implied by these two, namely: “What is ‘I’?”. The latter seems to be especially intriguing for contemporary Western philosophers, like Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Frege and Searle, whose investigations were essentially inspired by Kant’s analysis of “I” and the inner sense. This seemed also a key issue for the subject oriented philosophy developed in the Indian tradition since 600 BC. In this paper I am going to present one of the most ancient conceptions of the “ego” or “ego-making” principle (*ahamkara*)¹ which was offered by the classical Samkhya system, one considered to be the oldest philosophical school of India.

1. TWO BIRDS IN THE SAME TREE

In Western philosophy it was Kant who first distinguished the empirical ego, referring to the contents of our consciousness, from the pure transcendental “I” containing nothing in it, however, assuring the unity of apperception and being a formal condition of the coherence and continuity of the experiencing self. A hundred years later Husserl undertook the same thread by defining the transcendental “I” as an empty container devoid of any cognitive content and free from properties ascribed to the psychological subject, but still preserving the intentional attitude to the world. Contrary to the outer objects, our thoughts, emotions, intentions and other referents of the inner perception do not appear in space. They do, however, appear in time because during the whole time I am aware of myself I recognize this time as belonging to the unity of “I”. So it does not really matter, admits Kant, if I say that the whole time is *in me*, that is the individual self, or that I together with my numerical identity inhere *in time*.² While exploring phenomenologically our being in time, Roman Ingarden aptly notices that one can distinguish two types of human

experience of time. Generally, man can either perceive himself or herself as a being completely subordinate to time, undergoing a continual change and permanently reconstituting one's own "I", which is neither steady nor imperishable. On the other hand, one puts oneself beyond time and feels uninfluenced by it. He or she seems to prevail over time and transcend the presence by looking back into the past or forward into the future. In that case, man considers his or her ego to be real in the stronger sense than one's own experiences and finds this transcendental "I" as a persistent entity or true being.³

But yet, the notion of subject as something possessing a real simplicity at one time and identity through time has been rejected by several philosophers since Berkeley and Hume. They deny the substantial character and intelligibility of the transcendental self. For Wittgenstein this metaphysical subject, which cannot be described in psychological terms, does not belong to the world as he is merely a border of it. This aspect of "I" appears in philosophical discourse only because "the world is my world", says Wittgenstein.⁴ Since there is "mine" there must be the one who "owns". Nevertheless, as the author of *Tractatus* believes, this philosophical "I", the owner of perceptions, in a certain essential sense, does not exist.⁵ Thus, the key issue that divide Western philosophers into those who advocate the necessity of the true invariable "I" and those who name it a "fiction" is whether that which is transcendental to the conscious experience, being neither its element nor moment, has to be unknowable and completely inaccessible to our cognition or not.

We can also find the intuition of the double self-understanding of the subject in Indian thought. As early as in the Upanishads (600 BC) we can trace the fundamental distinction between two aspects of subjectivity – temporal, transformable "I" or mind (*manas, buddhi, citta*) and constant, invariable or immutable ultimate self (*atman, purusha*). In *Maitri Upanishad* the elemental self including body and mind is opposed to the supreme, universal self or spirit that is eternal and free from the burden of karma and ignorance.⁶ To clarify this crucial idea of twofold subjectivity, Indian thinkers use a metaphor of two birds (*dva suparna*) sitting in the same tree; one of them eats the sweet fruit while the other looks on the latter without eating.⁷ The eating bird stands for the active aspect of our self, who is the actual doer, experiencing and enjoying or suffering in the world. The seeing bird refers to the passive inner controller (*antary-atmin*) and actionless witness (*sakshin*) who is beyond all misery and joy. These two selves are inseparable as long as the man is alive but only the passive self who is also called the unseen seer (*adrishto drashta*) is immor-

tal.⁸ He is free from all the empirical qualities and time limits and still controls the other self from within.

In another Upanishad we also find a familiar parable of the chariot depicting the complexity and inner hierarchy of human nature.⁹ The true self (*atman*) is compared to the owner of a chariot (*rathin*), the body being the chariot (*ratha*), intellect (*buddhi*) is the driver (*sarathi*), the horses are said to be the senses (*indriyani*), mind or the inner sense (*manas*) is the reins (*pragraha*) by which the intellect controls the senses.¹⁰ Here again the main distinction is between the passive but constantly attentive upper "I" (the owner) and the lower one who predominates over all bodily and mental activities but remains subordinate to the supreme transcendental self. Generally, in none of the classical Indian philosophical texts can we find a description of the true self as a thinking substance. The thoughts by themselves cannot identify the substance. To the famous Cartesian slogan "I think therefore I am" Indian philosophy would rather oppose saying "Thinking is not the nature of the true self". So, the capacity for thinking is not identified with consciousness (*cit*),¹¹ which is thought to be absolutely dissociated from the empirical context of the individual and "without an object". According to the Samkhya view, mind as well as body is deemed to be of the same metaphysical substance, namely *prakriti* being the equivalent to matter, or more precisely nature as *physis*. As we read in *Samkhyakarika*, the oldest text of the Samkhya school (c. 450 AD), the realm of *prakriti* is held to be inherently unconscious (*acetana*), and is thereby incapable of producing consciousness as an effect.¹² The manifestations of *prakriti* are always objects, and it is argued that objects can never transform themselves into subjects. Subjective awareness (*purusha*), who is the absolute, unconditional self or passive witness (*drashritva*, SK 19) constitutes a distinct ontological category and it cannot be derived from the substance of which objects are made. Movement, changeability and form are characteristics of *prakriti*, and they are also characteristics of thought; whereas consciousness is claimed to be intrinsically formless and immutable. The representational content of thought is carried in the unconscious physical configurations of mind, of which only some become illuminated by transcendental awareness. Yet consciousness and the illuminated mental processes remain entirely independent and unmixed.

Thus, in sharp contrast to the Western approach, the mind and the cognitive activities it sustains are held to be substantially unconscious.¹³ According to classical Indian systems the deep philosophical problem in the case of human perception lies in the explication of the fact that the bio-mechanically induced structure consisting of body-mind complex is

imbued with conscious awareness which by no means can be reduced to the representational operations of the mind. Interestingly, this typical Samkhya mind/consciousness dualism, contrasting to the familiar Cartesian body/mind division, seems to be much more compatible with the cognitive sciences and AI analysis based on a computational paradigm, in which it is assumed that cognitive phenomena, both natural and artificial, are founded on computational procedures undergone in physical systems. Both the Samkhya-Yoga and modern functionalist conceptions of mind agree that the activities of the cognitive organ of mind have nothing to do with consciousness. However, contrary to functionalism which simply theoretically excludes consciousness from the research programs, Indian philosophers do not give up their search for the source of the genuine subjectivity. They clearly believe that it is the material substance of mind which thinks but only the true self can make these thoughts conscious and understandable (see Fig. 1).¹⁴

The phenomenal self in Samkhya and Yoga systems corresponds to the complex of three faculties recognized as *buddhi* – translated as intellect, *ahamkara* or *asmita*, that is egoity, I-hood or I-am-ness, and *manas* – mind. In *Yogasutras*, the oldest treatise of the Yoga system (c. 300 AD), they are also all together referred to by an umbrella term “*citta*” while in Samkhya the equivalent is “*antahkarana*”. The inner sense functioning in the mode of *manas* synthesizes all the sense data, associates the memories and mediates in the process of cognition and action between *buddhi* and the sense-organs; in the mode of *ahamkara* the inner sense generates a deluded selfhood or egotic identity; and while acting in the mode of *buddhi* it stands for the constitution of the highest, the most subtle level of the empirical seer (*sattvic buddhi*) which is illuminated by transcendental awareness, or the true self, which enables the particular individual to experience his own cognitions.

In the following part of the present paper I will focus on one aspect of this phenomenal self, namely *ahamkara*, acting as the ego-making prin-

THE EMPIRICAL SELF	THE TRUE SELF
“Thinking substance”, inherently unconscious, mutable, active, intentional, enjoying or suffering	Immutable pure awareness, consciousness, passive witness, beyond all misery and joy

Fig. 1. Two aspects of subjectivity according to Samkhya system.

ciple, which plays the crucial role both in the psychological and cosmological description of the world presented in Samkhya philosophy.

2. WHERE DOES "I" COME FROM AND GO AWAY?

What is characteristic of Samkhya cosmogony is that the process of creation of the world reflects also the subsequent stages of constituting the perceiver of the world. In other words, development or evolution of the objective reality, the seen, is analogical or even consequent to the process of the emerging of the empirical subject, the seer. Macro and microcosmic perspective are combined here into one homogeneous doctrine. Both objective and subjective realms are the results of the creative activity of primordial matter or nature, *prakriti*, conceived as the female principle giving birth to all phenomena divided into 24 categories (*tattva*).¹⁵ However, according to Samkhya, "creation" means only the unmanifest (*avyakta*) becoming manifest (*vyakta*) as it is impossible for an entity to come into existence out of non-entity (SK 9).¹⁶ The fundamental and primary germ of nature (*pradhana*) whence all the perceivable phenomena are developed does not manifest itself and is beyond any perception. Out of this "unevolved evolver of all things" *buddhi*, that is intellect or the universal thinking substance, emerges as the first very subtle yet material principle. The second product of *prakriti* is the ego-making principle, *ahamkara*, which in its turn produces mind (*manas*) and the ten sensory and motor organs (*buddhindriya* – ear, skin, eye, tongue, nose, and *karmendriya* – speech, arm, leg, organ of generation and excretion), as well as five subtle elements (*tanmatra* – sound, touch, form, taste, smell) which give rise, respectively, to the five gross elements (*mahabhuta* – space, air, fire, water, earth). Thus, the explanation of the origin of the physical universe and phenomenal self may be characterized so far as naturalistic. What prevents the doctrine from being just a simple physicalist philosophy of nature is its recognition of the pure awareness or spirit, *purusha*, which is the principle for the sake of which nature, *prakriti*, evolves. If we analyze the process of vertical evolution (*pradhana* → *buddhi* → *ahamkara* → 16 *indriyas* + 5 *tanmatras*) we can easily see that the crucial stage is the emergence of "I"-ness or ego principle. Here, at the level of *ahamkara* the very basic category of individuality is being established by manifesting a rudimentary distinction between "myself" and "not myself" (SK 24). Such a splitting-up does not take place before the emergence of *ahamkara*, because *buddhi*, in spite of it being the first evolute of *prakriti*, cannot really discharge its function without the ego principle which

releases the external objective world and allows the empirical self to come into being. Only *ahamkara* provides the basis for the subject-object relationship in so far as it gives birth to both the “subjective” and “objective” series, namely mind and the senses (*manas-indriya*, see 4–14 in Fig. 2) versus subtle and gross elements (*tanmatra-mahabhuta*, see 15–24 in Fig. 2).¹⁷

To elucidate the significant and puzzling role that the ego-making principle plays in Samkhya cosmogony and psychology we need to examine carefully the exact meaning of the term. It is derived from: *aham* – “I” and *kāra*, which has several different meanings, like: (a) making, doing, working, making a sound or utterance; (b) a maker, doer; (c) an effort, exertion, determination, religious austerity; (d) a master, lord; and also (e) killing, slaughter; (f) bringing down, humiliation. Thus, we can generally determine three possible readings of *ahamkara*:

1. **cosmological** – *ahamkara* read as “cry: *aham!*”, or the “uttering: *I*” is a key stage of the world creation process; it plays a similar role to an original being from ancient Vedic cosmogony who, when about to create the world, cries out “Here am *I*”.¹⁸
2. **phenomenological** – “*I*-making” or “individuality-making”, but also “individual’s making” in the sense “making by the individual”.¹⁹
3. **soteriological** – “wrong *I*” or “*I* killing”, which means bringing down one’s ego that is to be mastered through spiritual determination and, finally, “killed” or “resolved” back into the unmanifest and unindividualized form of nature, *pradhana*.

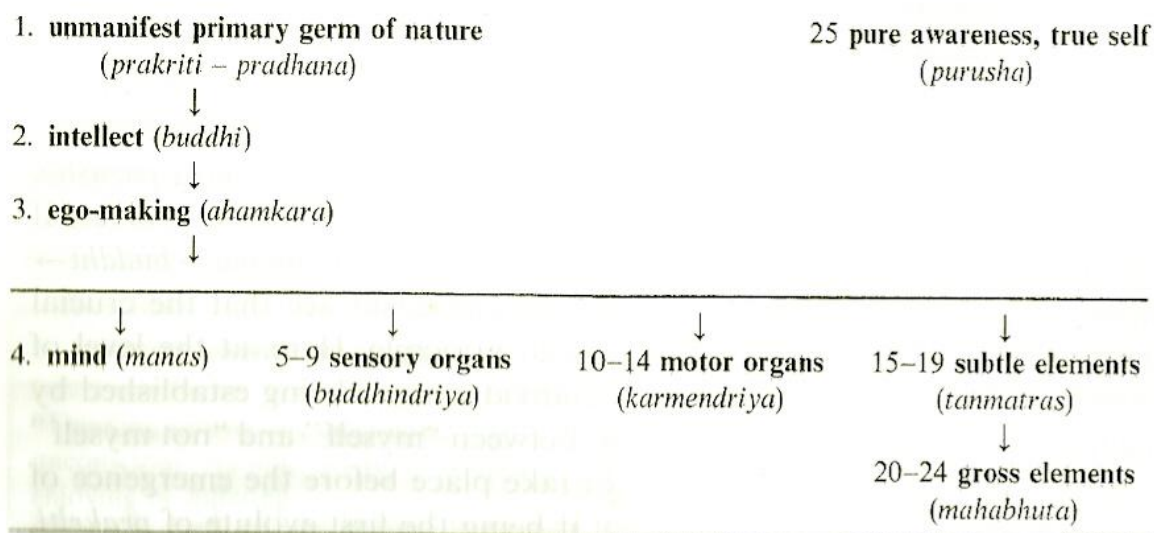


Fig. 2. Scheme of the cosmological and psychological evolution in Samkhya.

All these three readings, though they arise from quite different perspectives, are complementary rather than competitive or exceptive. *Ahamkara* in the first meaning does not function as a psychological principle but as an evolutionary and cosmic one. This cosmogony oriented understanding is characteristic of the early theistic stage of Samkhya school development when *ahamkara* was even identified with Prajapati, the mythical Father of creation²⁰ who produces the world as sacrificial food for himself by knowledge, austerity and self-formulation. By placing the I-making principle in the sequence of the creation stages early Samkhya acknowledges the ancient speculations on creation-by-naming or formation-by-formulation, which consider name and form (*nama-rupa*) to be inseparable. Incidentally, this cosmogonical idea is also crucial to the biblical world image where God-Creator's name is Yahweh or "I am that I am" (*Exodus* 3:13–15).

However, in what sense emerging of "I"-ness or egoity is necessary to manifest the world? According to the Samkhya view, *ahamkara* comes into being as a result of the proximity of two eternal realms – pure transcendental consciousness, *purusha*, or *cetana*, and unconscious creative nature, *prakriti*, or *acetana*.²¹ The former reflects itself in the cosmic intellect, *buddhi*, being the first manifestation of *prakriti*. Thus, the universal and undifferentiated *buddhi* needs an individuality-making principle to make a distinction between the ego and non-ego, that is subject and object, as well as between one object and another – no matter whether inanimate or organic, human or animal, vegetal or mineral etc. If one

<i>aham</i> = 'I'	<p><i>kāra</i> (derived from \sqrt{kr} or $\sqrt{krī}$) =</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) making, doing, working, including making a sound or utterance (b) a maker, doer (c) an effort, exertion, determination, religious austerity (d) master, lord (e) killing, slaughter (f) bringing down and humiliation, offence, injury, wrong, wickedness, malice
<i>aham-kāra</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. cosmological – cry: "aham!" 2. phenomenological – 'I'-making 3. soteriological – wrong 'I'

Fig.3. The possible meanings of 'ahamkara.'

being, or object, is not distinct from another it cannot be perceived or even exist. And, similarly, if one subject is not able to distinguish itself from another self then his own experience of the world cannot be possible. Therefore, *ahamkara*, which founds both individuality and subjectivity, is absolutely essential to formulate the ego/non-ego distinction and to establish both the objective and subjective reality, or particular physical entities and their perception undertaken by the individual empirical consciousness.

Another interesting issue implied by the first meaning of *ahamkara* is its self-reflective character. The uttering “*aham!*”, though it is the second stage in the evolution of *prakriti*, is the one which introduces self-distinguishment into the world. In Samkhya this self-consciousness is not inherent to *prakriti*, or nature, because it is said to be the result of the association between nature and spirit which reflects the light of consciousness in the universal intellect, *buddhi*.

The second meaning of *ahamkara* indicates the significance of the phenomenal consciousness in the process of world creation. Yet, “creating” in this context is equivalent to “reflecting” or “projecting” the empirical self on nature, *prakriti*, and consequently imposing on the world the individual point of view. More precisely, one may say that all the mental and physical objects, including the agent of the empirical perception, i.e. the mind-and-senses complex, are themselves manifestations, or projections of the ego-principle. Thus, *ahamkara* is unique in marking the common meeting point for the knower and the known alike.

In the third reading the emphasis is placed on the self-delusive aspect of the “I”-making principle. The emergence of *ahamkara* stands for the bifurcation of subjectivity into the empirical “I” and the transcendental true self. And this splitting up is the root cause of ignorance (*avidya*) and all mundane suffering (*duhkha*). Wrong self-identification, namely the identification of the true self with the ego, leads to a mistaken self-understanding and disables the realization of the true knowledge and freedom from misery. To achieve the ultimate soteriological goal, Samkhya advocates dissolving *ahamkara* through discriminative cognition (*vivekakhyati*, SK 2, 4) of *prakriti* – both the manifest and unmanifest – and *purusha*. One may gain access to the state of liberation (*moksha*) only through the “implosion” of one’s ego, which as a result of the analysis of the *prakriti*’s principles (*tattvas*) arises in the form of discrimination: “I am not, nothing belongs to me, I do not exist” (*na asmi, na me, na aham* – SK 64). What this exactly means is that I am not what I thought myself to be under the delusion during the state of bondage; I am neither

my body nor the contents of my consciousness and nor even ego itself. Now I have attained the knowledge of the distinction between the unchangeable and ultimate true self and the mutable phenomenal self, functioning only as a provisory and transitional subject. Thus, according to the Samkhya school, the *raison d'être* of the ego-making principle is, on the one hand, making individuality as such possible – both objective and subjective – and introducing the element of subjectivity and self-reflection into the unconscious material world but, on the other hand, enabling the universal transcendental consciousness to evoke the personal dimension and, in consequence, to release the subject from the false self-identity with the empirical ego.

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NOTES

- ¹ For the convenience of the general reader the Sanskrit terms used in the text are given in a simplified transliteration so as to avoid the diacritical signs.
- ² I. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, N. Smith (trans.) (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), A 362.
- ³ R. Ingarden, "Człowiek i czas" in: *Książeczka o człowieku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1987), pp. 42–44.
- ⁴ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 5.632, 5.641.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.631.
- ⁶ *Maitri Upanishad* III.1–5 and IV.1–3 in: *The Principal Upaniṣads*, S. Radhakrishnan (ed. and trans.) (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953).
- ⁷ Cf. *Rigveda* I.164.20, *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad* IV.6, *Mundaka Upanishad* III.1.1.
- ⁸ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* III.7.23.
- ⁹ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 246f.
- ¹⁰ *Katha Upanishad* I.3.3–9.
- ¹¹ In Samkhya and Yoga, and also the Advaita Vedānta consciousness is neither a property nor an act of the self, but rather its constant ever-present essence. By essence they do not understand, however, a set of properties without which a thing cannot be what it is, but they believe that self IS consciousness. In other words, the two are identical. Cf. Bina Gupta, *Cit Consciousness* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 100.
- ¹² Cf. *Samkhyakarika* of Iśvarakṛishna, (in short: SK) 11: "(Both) the manifest and unmanifest (forms of nature, *prakṛiti*) are (characterized by the) three *gunas* ("constituents" or "strands"), undiscriminated, objective, general, non-conscious, productive. The *puruṣha* is the opposite of them." "The Sāṃhyakārikā of Iśvarakṛiṣṇa" (Sanskrit text with translation) in: Gerald J. Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), p. 259.
- ¹³ The question of dualism "mind/consciousness" opposed to the Western "mind/body" dichotomy is discussed in detail by Paul Schweizer, "Mind/Consciousness Dualism in

Sāṅkhya-Yoga Philosophy”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993), pp. 845–59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 851.

¹⁵ Some interesting comments on the origin of the cosmological ideas of Samkhya can be found in Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya’s, *History of Indian Cosmogonical Ideas* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1971), pp. 50–62.

¹⁶ According to the Samkhya doctrine of causality (*satkaryavada*) an effect pre-exists inherently in its cause and the ultimate cause of the objective world – both material and mental – is contained in the concept of *prakriti*. This conclusion is drawn from the subsequent arguments: (1) activity can be directed only towards an existent object; (2) effects are produced only by related material causes; (3) particular effects result from particular causes; (4) something cannot come from nothing; (5) cause and effect are substantially identical with each other in the material cause. Cf. *Samkhyakarika* 9.

¹⁷ Cf. Michel Hulin, “Reinterpreting ‘ahamkāra’ as a Possible Way of Solving the Riddle of Sāṅkhya Metaphysics” in: *Asiatische Studien. Études Asiatiques*, LIII:3 (1999), ed. Johannes Bronkhorst (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 715.

¹⁸ Such an interpretation of the meaning of *ahamkara* is argued by J. A. B. van Buitenen, “Studies in Sāṅkhya (II). Ahamkāra”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 77 (1957), p. 17. According to Van Buitenen this interpretation of *ahamkara* explains the creator’s part which this principle plays in the proto-Samkhyan evolution doctrine. The cry or ejaculation: “*aham!*” as a factor of world creation occurs in many passages in Brahmanas and Upanishads. A clear instance is found in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.1: “The self was here alone in the beginning in the form of a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself: and he cried out at the beginning: ‘Here am I’. That is how the name I came to be.”

¹⁹ These two last meanings are suggested by Madeleine Biardeau, “Ahamkāra. The Ego Principle in the Upaniṣad,” *Contribution to Indian Sociology* 8 (1965), p. 82.

²⁰ In *Mahabharata* XII.6780, 11234, 11575, 11601 and XIV.1445, the passages recording early Samkhya doctrine, where cosmological ideas are illustrated by mythological metaphors, *ahamkara* is equaled with Prajapati, the Father of creation. Cf. E. H. Johnston, *Early Sāṅkhya. An Essay on its Historical Development According to the Texts* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1937), p. 17. The same identification makes one of the ancient Samkhya teachers, Arada Kalama, who is believed to have taught Gautama before he became Buddha. Cf. Aśvaghosa, *Buddhacarita, or Acts of the Buddha*, E. H. Johnston (trans.) (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1933), reference to canto 12, 21 and the translator’s note.

²¹ *Samkhyakarika* 20: “Because of the proximity (or association) of the two – i.e., *prakriti* and *purusha* – the unconscious one appears as if characterized by consciousness. Similarly, the indifferent one appears as if characterized by activity, because of the activities of the three *gunas*”. Cf. G. J. Larson, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

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