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THE NYAYA-VAISESIKAS AS INTRPRETERS OF SRUTI

We know from Yāska's *Nirukta* that already during his time, which is said to be not later than 500 B.C.,¹ there were different schools of Vedic interpretation. Yāska mentions no less than eight such schools.² The more important among these seem to have been the school of the Aitihāsikas and that of the Nairuktas, Yaska himself being a follower of this latter school. The Aitihāsikas maintained that the events mentioned in the Veda (such as the fight between Indra and Vṛtra) are to be interpreted as historical facts.³ The Nairuktas, on the other hand, were etymologists and tried to show that the events mentioned in the Veda are not to be understood in a literal sense, but rather in a figurative sense and as allegories. At the time of Yāska the interpretation of the Veda was concerned primarily with the Mantra or Samhitā section of the Veda, specially of the *Rgveda*, and especially with the interpretation of particular words.⁴ In course of time, the Mīmāṃsā system, which is probably a further development of the Yājñika

school of Vedic interpretation mentioned by Yāska, made the study and interpretation of Veda its special field of interest and formulated a number of rules of textual interpretation of the words as well as the sentences in the Veda. The different schools of Vedānta—based as they are, like the Mīmāṃsā, on the Vedic texts—gave their own interpretations of these texts in accordance with the tenets of their own school.⁵

The rationally oriented classical systems of orthodox Hindu thought, no doubt, accepted the authority or validity (*prāmānya*) of the Veda, but the influence of the Veda on the philosophic thought of their followers was virtually insignificant. Apart from the fact that they accepted the Veda as one of the means of valid knowledge (*pramāna*) and that they endeavoured not to run counter to the teachings of the Veda as they understood it, they did not rely much on the Veda nor did they make use of it—in any case, not in any considerable degree—in their philosophical speculations. To this group belong the schools of Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika.⁶ In this paper we shall study the method—and principles, if any—of interpretation of the Veda, as followed by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas.

Of these, the Nyāya thinkers were primarily and principally interested in epistemological and logical questions concerning the

1. Cf. J. Gonda, *Vedic Literature* [A History of Indian Literature, ed. by J. Gonda, Vol. I, Fasc. 1] Wiesbaden: (Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), p. 32; See also H. Scharfe, *Grammatical Literature* [A History of Indian Literature, Vol. V, Fasc. 2] Wiesbaden: (Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), pp. 118f.
2. Cf. S.K. Gupta, "Ancient Schools of vedic Interpretation", *Journal of the Ganganatha Jha Research Institute* (Allahabad), Vol. XVI (1959), p. 144; B. Bhattacharya, *Yāska's Nirukta* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1958), pp. 110ff.
3. See, for instance, *Nirukta* XII, 1 which says that, according to the Aitihāsikas Aśvins, the twin-gods, are kings of old, who had done meritorious deeds.
4. The *Nirukta* is, in fact, nothing but a commentary on the *Nighanṭu*, a work which consists of a list of Vedic—in fact, almost exclusively Rgvedic—words, arranged in five chapters: the first three contain words arranged as groups of synonyms, the fourth a collection of rare forms and homonyms, and the fifth a list of names of Vedic deities.

5. Note that, while the Vedāntins were mostly interested in the interpretation of the Upaniṣads, on which their system of thought was primarily based, the Mīmāṃsakas, who were ritualists, made the Brāhmana texts the main object of their interpretation and study.
6. Here it may be added that the Veda has been the object of diverse interpretations even down to our days. In addition to the classical and traditional commentators of the Veda, like Śāyana (basically a Mīmāṃsaka, who lived in the fourteenth century), the Veda has also modern—and modernistic—interpreters. Among them are Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), who gave a theistic interpretation to the Upaniṣads; Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883), who gave the Samhitā portion of the Veda a somewhat social and political interpretation; and Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), who gave a spiritual and psychological interpretation of the Rgveda. According to Aurobindo, the hymns of the Rgveda are the symbolic gospel of the ancient Indian mystics. The central conception of the Veda is a struggle between the spiritual powers of Light and Darkness and the triumph of Truth over the Darkness of Ignorance as well as of Immortality (Cf. Sri Aurobindo *On the Veda*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1964, Part I, especially pp. 263 and 258).

nature, origin, validity and objects of knowledge as well as the means of correct ways of logical reasoning. The Vaiśeṣikas, on their part, turned their special attention to the philosophy of nature. Already this mention of the special interests in their philosophic speculation as well as of the rational method they employed in their thinking warns us not to expect too much from them as interpreters of Veda when compared to the followers of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. Moreover, the material we have in their writings on this point is much less than that which is found in the Mīmāṃsā or Vedānta works. The meagre material they offer us is available in two contexts: firstly and principally, in their defence of the Veda as a means of valid knowledge; and secondly, in their usage and interpretation of a few Vedic passages in their proofs for the existence of God (*īśvara*).

In this paper we speak of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas as one class of thinkers. Although the basic texts—the Sūtra texts—of the two schools and their special interests in philosophy were different, they had so much in common in their philosophy that they came to be considered as a combined system, especially in the later period of their history. Moreover, in the course of time the distinction between Naiyāyika and Vaiśeṣika becomes less tangible. An author like Udayana, whose contribution to our theme we shall consider in this paper, wrote works related to both Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools and hence he may be considered as well a Vaiśeṣika as a Naiyāyika.

When we speak of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas as interpreters of Sruti we do not mean that they wrote commentaries or interpretative works on the whole Veda or even a good portion of it; for they gave interpretation of only a few Vedic passages, which they used in their philosophic texts. Nor do we intend to place them on the same footing as the Mīmāṃsakas, who were *ex professo* interpreters of the Veda, especially of those portion of it which were connected with sacrifices, and had drawn up a set of principles and rules governing its interpretation.

With the word 'Sruti' in the title we want to indicate that we restrict our consideration to the Vedic texts—or taken collectively, Veda—strictly so called, namely, the four Samhitās with their Brāhmanas, Aranyakas and Upanisads, which are recognized by the classical Hindu thinkers as Sruti (a word often rendered into English by 'Revelation'), and which are clearly distinct from the

group of scriptures that are called Smṛti (often rendered by 'Tradition').⁷

With these preliminary remarks we shall now pass on to consider how the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers interpreted a few Vedic texts.

II

The first and the principal context in which we have some data concerning the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika interpretation of the Veda is, as already mentioned, in their defence of the validity of the Veda. Without entering into the details of their conception of the nature and validity of the Veda we may mention that, unlike the Mīmāṃsakas, who considered the Veda as eternal (*nitya*) and derived its validity from the fact that it has no person as author (*apauruseya*), the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas considered the Veda as non-eternal and as having an author in the person of *īśvara*, who, at the beginning of each creation, proclaims or communicates the Veda to the newly-created beings. They derive the validity of the Veda from the fact that it has been proclaimed (*ukta, prokta*) by *īśvara*, who, being omniscient (*sarvajña*), compassionate towards creatures (*bhūtānukampayā yukta*), and free from any cause or motive for deceiving others by communicating what is untrue, is supremely trustworthy (*paramārtha*).

However, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas had to refute the objections of those who called the validity of the Veda in question or even went to the extent of openly challenging its validity.⁸ Their objections against the validity of the Veda centred round three faults which they ascribe to it: untruth (*anṛtatva*), contradiction (*vyāgbhātava*), and repetition (*punaruktatā*).

The Veda contains, first of all, untruth (*anṛtatva*), the opponents claimed. There is, for example, a Vedic statement which says: 'He who desires a son should offer the Putreṣṭi sacrifice' (*putrakāmaḥ putreṣṭyā yajeta*), implying that he who performs

7. The words 'Revelation' and 'Tradition', when applied to the Hindu scriptures, are not to be understood in the sense in which they are used in Christian theology, but as approximate designations.

8. Among those who denied the authority of the Veda are the Buddhists, Jains, Cārvākas and Kāpālikas. Already in Yaska's *Nirukta* (1. 15) we find Kautsa arguing against the 'meaninglessness' (*anarthakatva*) of the Vedic hymns.

the Putreṣṭi sacrifice will beget a son. Nevertheless, even after the performance of the prescribed sacrifice, it happens that no son is born. Similar is the case of the Vedic injunction prescribing the Kārīri sacrifice as a means of inducing rain. The fruits promised by these Vedic injunctions belong to the domain of the perceptible (*dr̥ṣṭārtha*), and yet they are not perceived after the performance of the prescribed sacrifice. If there is, thus, untruth in the Vedic statements, which deal with perceptible realities, one can assume that there is untruth also in the case of other Vedic statements (like 'He who desires heaven should offer the Agnihotra sacrifice'), which speak of imperceptible realities (*adr̥ṣṭārtha*) such as heaven, gods and the like.

Secondly, the Veda suffers from the defect of contradictions (*vyāghātatva*). There is, for instance, on the one hand, a Vedic injunction which says: 'Sacrificial oblation should be made after sunrise; sacrificial oblation should be made before sunrise; sacrificial oblation should be made at daybreak' (*udite hotavyam, anūdite hotavyam, samayādhyusite hotavyam*). On the other hand, we find another statement: 'Syāva eats up the oblation of him who offers after sunrise; Sabala eats up the oblation of him who offers before sunrise; [both] Syāva and Sabala⁹ eat up the oblation of him who offers at daybreak'. These two sets of Vedic statements contradict each other.

The third defect ascribed by the opponents to the Veda is that of repetition (*punaruktatā*). Thus we find there the statement, 'One recites the first [verse] three times, [and] three times the last [verse]' (*trih prathamām anvāha trir uttamām*), wherein the sacrificing priest is asked to recite three times the first and the last verses of a hymn. The opponents claim that repetition is to be found only in the statements of insane (or drunken) persons (*unmatta*).¹⁰

9. Syāva and Sabala are Yama's dogs, said to be four-eyed, dark-coloured and fierce (cf. *R̥gveda* X. 14. 1012). These two offsprings of Indra's bitch, Saramā, are believed to guard the road to Yama's kingdom of the dead.

10. The three objections are mentioned in *Nyāyasūtra* II, 1, 57. (The ed. used is: *Nyāya-Darśanam*, containing *Nyāyabhāṣya*, *Nyāyavārttika*, and *Nyāyavārttikatātparyāṅkā*,..... [Calcutta Sanskrit Series, No. XVIII], Calcutta, 1936) For the explanation of the objections and the Nyāya answer to them, see *Nyāyasūtra* II, 1, 57-68 with the commentaries. See also Jayanta's *Nyāyamañjarī* (ed.: Kashi Sanskrit Series, No. 106, Part I,

The triple defect of untruth, contradiction and repetition ascribed to the Veda by the opponents seemingly affect the absolute validity of the Veda. In the face of such attacks on the Veda, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, who believes that the Veda is absolutely valid or true, tries to vindicate its validity or truth by interpreting the Vedic statements which were mentioned by the opponents to be affected by the alleged defects—in such a way that they appear to be free from any of those defects.

With regard to the first defect attributed to the Veda, namely, untruthfulness (*anṛtatva*), which was exemplified by the fact that even after the performance of the Putreṣṭi sacrifice prescribed in the Veda as a means to beget a son, no son is born, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas answer that the non-birth of son is not due to the untruthfulness or invalidity of the Vedic injunction itself, but rather to the imperfections of the agent, action and/or the instruments (*karṭṛkarmasādhanaivaigunyaṭ*). When the Putreṣṭi is performed without any imperfections in any of the said three factors, the birth of a son necessarily follows, unless some grave sin committed in the past by the sacrificer (*yajamāna*) acts as a deterring or obstructing agent (*pratibandhaka*) in the production of the fruit of the sacrifice.¹¹

As regards the third defect attributed to the Veda by the opponents—we shall deal with the second defect later—namely, repetition (*punaruktata*), the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas distinguish between repetition without a purpose (*anarthako' bhyāsa*), which is indeed a defect, and repetition which has a purpose (*arthavān abhyāsa*) called *anuvāda*, and being purposeful, it is not a defect. With regard to the case of repetition brought forward by the opponents as vitiating the validity of the Veda, 'One recites the first [verse] three times [and] three times the last [verse]', the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas claim that the prescribed repetition is not a defect since it has a purpose; for it is only by repeating the first and the last verses three times that the prescribed total number of fifteen *sāmidheni-s* (i.e. verses recited while the sacrificial fire is being kindled or fed with fuel) is obtained.

The first objection is concerned with the lack of conformity

Henares, 1934), p. 248, 23ff. [Note that in the references to the Sanskrit philosophical texts, other than the *Sūtras*, the first number indicates the page, the number (or numbers) that follows the line (or lines), on that page].

11. Cf. Jayanta's *Nyāyamañjarī* 250, 23-26; 251., 23-24.

of a Vedic statement with a fact extrinsic to the Veda, a fact which is verifiable when the Vedic statement concerns perceptible realities (*dyṣtārtha*). The absence of this conformity is explained by factors which are extraneous to the Vedic text itself. The third defect does not seem to affect the intrinsic validity or truth of the Vedic statement in question. In neither case does the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika give an interpretation of the Vedic texts themselves; the Vedic texts are accepted to be true in their literal sense.

Somewhat different is the case of the second objection and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika answer to it, for here the opponent finds fault with the Veda for containing statements that are opposed to or contradicting each other. This is a more serious defect than the other two inasmuch as it affects the very intrinsic validity or truth of the Veda. In order to defend the validity of the Veda against the objection of contradiction (*vyāghaṭatva*, *viruddhatā*) the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas had, therefore, to give a satisfactory interpretation of the Vedic texts. (so as to remove the alleged defect from them.)

As regards the three times mentioned in the given Vedic passage for the sacrificial oblation—which means here the daily performance of the Agnihotra sacrifice—these thinkers assert that it mentions three different times¹² suitable for the performance of the sacrifice out of which a person can choose a time that is convenient for him. But once he has made the choice, he should stick faithfully to the chosen time. The undesirable consequences that are said to follow, namely, that Syāva or Sabala or both of them will eat up the oblation, if it is made at each of the three suggested times, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas answer that this will happen only if a person after he has chosen one of the three times for performing the oblation changes his mind subsequently.

III

Behind the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas interpretation of the Veda lies

12. The Agnihotra, enjoined on all twice-born classes to be performed until the end of their lives, is to be performed twice every day, in the evening and in the morning. Cf. among other texts, *Kauṣītaki-Bṛāhmaṇa* (ed. by Sreekrishna Sarma, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1968) II. 8.9. The three different times referred to here concern the morning offering. On the right time for performing this sacrifice, cf. H. W. Bodewitz, *The Daily Evening and Morning Offering (Agnihotra)* according to the *Bṛāhmaṇas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), pp. 11-50.

the fundamental doctrine that the Veda is absolutely valid or true and so it cannot contain any error. These thinkers deduce the 'inerrancy'—they themselves use the term *prāmānya*, 'validity'—of the Veda from the fact that, as indicated earlier, Iśvara, the first communicator, that is to say, the author and originator, of the Veda is absolutely trustworthy. A person communicating a truth to another is said to be trustworthy (*āpta*), according to these authors, when he possesses the following qualifications. Firstly, he should have had a direct perception of what he communicates. In the case of the Veda, it is a direct perception of the Dharma taught in the Veda (*sāksātkeṛtadharma*). Secondly, such a person should have compassion for the creatures (*bbūtadayā*) to whom he communicates the truth. Thirdly, he should possess the will or desire to communicate the truth exactly as it is (*yathārthacikhyā-paiṣā*) to the creatures, who are otherwise unable to know the means of avoiding what is to be avoided and of obtaining what is to be obtained.¹³ These three qualities are found in Iśvara in the highest degree and hence he is supremely trustworthy (*parāmāpta*).¹⁴ A fourth qualification was later on mentioned as necessary for a person to communicate the Veda by word of mouth, namely, the possession of power of speech (*karanapātava*). This too was ascribed to Iśvara by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas who maintained that for the purpose of teaching the living beings, Iśvara temporarily takes up a body which will enable him to possess the physical organs and power of speech (such as mouth, tongue, palate, lips, etc.) and thus he is able to proclaim the Veda to the first living beings at the beginning of each new creation.¹⁵

13. On the three qualities of a trustworthy (*āpta*) communicator, see *Nyāyabhāṣya* to *Nyāyasūtra* II, 1. 68 (pp. 465.6-466.2 of the edition mentioned in note 10).

14. On these qualities of Iśvara, see G. Chemparathy, *An Indian Rational Theology* [Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, ed. by G. Oberhammer, Vol. I], Vienna, 1972, pp. 164-175; 158-162.

15. The Veda belongs to the means of valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) called *śabda* (= 'word', 'verbal testimony'), which was defined by the Nyāya authors as 'the communication (or teaching) of a trustworthy person' (*āptopadeśaḥ śabdaḥ*). The communication of the Veda being conceived as oral, even in its initial stage at the time of the new creation, the trustworthy person (who is none other than Iśvara), who communicates or teaches it, was assumed to possess temporarily a body. See on this point, G. Chemparathy, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-154 and 140-148.

If Ísvara is thus supremely trustworthy, it follows that the Veda proclaimed by him should be absolutely valid or true and that it contains no contradiction. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas have made a special effort to show that the Veda does not contain the defect of contradiction, and it is particularly in doing so that they have revealed themselves as interpreters of the Veda. Hence we shall consider this point in some detail.

IV

One of the authors who has dealt with the question of contradiction in the Veda is Bhāsarvajña, a Naiyāika belonging probably to the tenth century and author of a Nyāya manual called *Nyāyasāra* and of an auto-commentary on it called *Nyāyabhāṣanam*. To the objection of the opponent that the Vedic text mentions three different times for the performance of the Agnihotra sacrifice but then there is another statement wherein it is said that Syāva or Sabala or both of them will eat up the offerings made at each of the three times mentioned, Bhāsarvajña answers—like his predecessors—that the evil consequences mentioned in the second part of the passage will follow only if, after having chosen the time for the prescribed sacrifice, a person changes it.¹⁶ After this explanation he formulates a general principle to be followed with regard to Vedic sentences that appear to be contradictory:

In the same manner, also other Vedic statements (which appear to be contradictory) should be interpreted as being free from contradiction. Indeed, even other (namely, non-Vedic or even secular) works do not communicate the intended meaning, when interpreted by persons of poor intelligence.¹⁷

Even those Vedic passages, which appear to be contradictory, should be interpreted in such a way that there is no contradiction. For, as the same author writes:

16. Cf. *Nyāyabhāṣanam* (ed. by Svāmī Yogīndrānanda. Varanasi, 1968), 393, 26-394, 6.

17. *Ibid.* 394, 7-8: *tathānyesām apy āgamavakāyanam avirodhena vyākhyānam kartavyam, na hy anyāny api śāstrāni kubuddhibhir vyākhyātni yathabhimatam artham jñāpayanti.*

[The Veda contains] nothing that is contradictory. For, it is only to him, who does not discern rightly (*tattvataḥ*) the meaning of the Vedic statements that [the Veda] appears (*pratibhāti*) to have contradiction.¹⁸

Bhāsarvajña provides us with some examples of his interpretation of the apparently contradictory statements in the Veda. There are, for instance, some Vedic passages that speak of the oneness or identity of the individual soul (*jīva*) with the Supreme Being called Brahman, which the Advaita Vedāntins utilize in order to establish their view of the identity of the individual souls with Brahman. There are also passages which speak of Brahman as the only reality. Adherent of a school of thought which professes realistic pluralism, our author rejects the Advaita Vedāntin's interpretation of such passages. After advancing a set of Vedic passages wherein the distinction between the individual souls and the Supreme Brahman is clearly expressed, Bhāsarvajña points out that the Vedic passages, which speak of Brahman as the sole reality, should be interpreted as applying to the Supreme Brahman, not to be understood in the Advaita sense of an impersonal Brahman, but in the sense of a personal God known as Ísvara, who is only one (*eka*) without any other equal to him.¹⁹

Similarly, the Vedic passage, 'All this is Brahman' (*sarvam khalv idam brahma: Chand. Up. III, 14, 1*) is not to be interpreted in a monistic sense. The correct interpretation of this passage, according to Bhāsarvajña, is that all the universe is Brahman, that is to say, Ísvara, in as much as he directs it (*brahmādhishthitavena*), or in as much as he has brought it into being (*brahmakṛtatvena*). All other similar Vedic statements that speak of Brahman as the sole reality should be interpreted, according to our author, in the same manner as being free from contradiction (*avirodhena*). A non-dualistic (*advaita*) interpretation of such passages would contradict other Vedic passages which speak of multiplicity of reality, a view that is followed by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas. One who does not admit a second reality other than Brahman will have to concede that the Vedic pass-

18. *Ibid.* 393, 26-27: *vīruddhārthābhāvāt.*

yo hi vedavakyanam tattvato

'rtham na vivicayati, tasyaiva virodhaḥ pratibhāti.

19. *Ibid.* 394, 8; 576, 6-7.

ages, wherein a second reality is mentioned (such as in *Svet. Up.* IV, 6 and VI, 7; *Matrr. Up.* VI, 22) are not valid, for such passages cannot be interpreted as having a figurative or metaphorical sense (*upacāra*: lit. 'by [verbal] approach'), since there is no reason for doing so. And it cannot be assumed that in one and the same sacred scripture some statements are valid or true and others invalid or untrue, since it has only one author in the person of Iśvara, who is supremely trustworthy.²⁰

We should like to adduce two more instances of Bhāsarvajña's manner of 'right' interpretation of Vedic texts which are even more interesting than the ones just mentioned.

The first concerns the passage in *Svet. Up.* IV, 5, which can be translated thus:

Indeed, the one [male], unborn, enjoys lying close to the one [female], unborn, [having the colours of] red, white [and] black, [and] producing many offsprings similar to herself. The other [male], unborn, after having enjoyed her, abandons her.²¹

In this passage, to be understood in its original Sāmkhyistic sense, two kinds of souls in their relation to matter or Prakṛti are spoken of:²² the soul in its transmigratory state, in which it is depicted as being conjoined to the Prakṛti and enjoying the experiences of pleasure and pain that result from this union; and the soul which, after having 'enjoyed' the Prakṛti by experiencing pleasure and pain by her means and having acquired the true discriminating knowledge (*viveka*), is liberated from its transmigratory existence. The 'one' (*ekām*: note the feminine form) which is described as 'unborn' (*ajām*), red, white and black (*lobitaśuklakṛṣṇām*) and as producing many offsprings similar to herself (*babūḥ prajāḥ sṛjānām sarūpāḥ*) is the Prime Matter or Prakṛti. The Sanskrit term *puruṣa* for 'soul' is masculine in gender, while

20. *Ibid.* 576, 7-12.

21. 'Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad IV, 5: *ajām ekām lohitaśuklakṛṣṇām babūḥ prajāḥ sṛjānām sarūpāḥ*; *ajo hy eko jṣamāno'niṣete jahāty enāu bhuktabhogām ajo'nyau!*

22. The terms *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* are not used in the original passage; but it is clear that the expressions *ajāḥ* and *ajā*, taken with their predicates, are to be understood in the sense of *Puruṣa* and *prakṛti*.

prakṛti for 'prime matter' is feminine, and this explains the respective masculine and feminine forms *ajāḥ* and *ajā* for *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, both of which, being eternal, are unborn (*aja*). The three colours ascribed to the Prakṛti, red, white and black, express the three *gunas*—*rajas*, *sattva* and *tamas* respectively—which constitute the Prakṛti. The characterization of Prakṛti as 'producing many offsprings similar to herself' expresses its evolutive nature, giving rise to the universe of multiple and variegated beings.²³

In contrast to the Sāmkhyins, who hold Prakṛti to be the material cause of the universe, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas maintain that the material cause of the universe, consists of four kinds of atoms, namely, earth (*pṛthivi*), water (*āp*), fire (*tejas*) and air (*vāyu*).²⁴ Bhāsarvajña, therefore, tries to interpret the above-mentioned Upaniṣadic passage, which is originally set in a Sāmkhyistic context, in conformity with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika theory. He applies the term 'unborn' (*ajām*), predicated of the Prakṛti, to the atoms; for these too, being eternal, are unborn. The colours predicated of the Prakṛti are likewise applied to the colours possessed by the atoms.²⁵ Through their different conjunctions the atoms bring forth diverse kinds of beings, which are similar to them, just as the Prakṛti does through its evolution. Since the atoms are the material cause—or, as the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas often prefer to call it, the inherent cause (*samavāyikāraṇa*)—of physical things, the term *prakṛti*—which in Sanskrit is feminine in gender—can be applied to it, and

23. Such is the Sāmkhyistic interpretation of this passage. But it has been differently interpreted by Sankara (see his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* I, 4, 8-10), who considers Sāmkhya as a heterodox (*vedāvairuddha*) system, and applies the term *ajām* ('unborn'), having the colours red, white and black, to the one without a second, which sent forth fire, water and food (mentioned in *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* VI, 2, 1-4 and VI, 4, 1-4). Moreover, the terms *ajāḥ* and *ajā* mean not only 'unborn', or eternal, applicable to the *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, but they also mean respectively 'a he-goat' and 'a she-goat'. Hence some translate the passage using this sense, but understood as similes for *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. See, for example, R. Hauschild, *Die Svetāśvatara-Upaniṣad* (Leipzig, 1927), p. 23.

24. We leave out ether (*ākāśa*), the fifth physical substance (*bhūta*), out of consideration here, since according to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas it occupies a special position in comparison with the other four substances. Ether is non-atomic and non-corporeal (*amūrta*), and it does not form the constitutive element of any compound substance.

25. Unlike the atoms of earth, water and fire, the atoms of air (*vāyu*) have no colour.

thus the feminine form *ajām*, originally predicated of *prakṛti*, can be applied to the atoms. Furthermore, considering the atoms as a collection or a whole (*samudāya*), the singular form *ajām*, originally predicated of *Prakṛti*, which is only one, can be applied to the atoms, though these are multiple and belong to four different classes. Such a consideration of the atoms as a collection or as a whole in the singular is not illegitimate; for in the passage in question the singular is used for *Prakṛti* despite the fact that it consists of three *guna-s*: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.²⁶

The second passage, which Bhāsarvajña interprets by the same method, is *Svet. Up. III, 13*, which in its original context can be translated thus: "The inner self, who is a person (*purusa*) of the measure of a thumb (*angusthamātra*), always abides in the heart of the creatures..."²⁷

The conception of the soul (the term *purusa* in the passage) as being of the size of a thumb (*angusthamātra*) is not acceptable to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas, who maintain that all souls, as well the individual souls as the Supreme Soul called *Īśvara*, have the maximum size (*paramamahattva*), or, as it is more often maintained, are omnipresent (*vibhu*: 'being everywhere', 'all-pervading'). Therefore, in order to justify the validity of this passage in conformity with the doctrines of his school, Bhāsarvajña interprets it in a twofold manner.

In the first interpretation our author takes the word *purusa* in the passage to mean 'individual soul'. Since the individual soul cannot be said to be of the size of a thumb according to the tenets of his school, Bhāsarvajña applies the term *angusthamātraḥ* ('having the size of the thumb') not to the individual souls but rather to the subtle body, technically known as *ātivābikaśarira* ('the body that carries across or over'), which is produced by the merit and demerit of the soul in order to enable its rebirth in another body by effecting the conjunction of the atomic psychical organ (*manas*) with the all-pervading soul. Bhāsarvajña offers a justification for such an interpretation. He argues, that since the term *purusa* has been found to be used to designate the gross or material body (*sthūlaśarira*), it should be applicable *a fortiori* to the *ātivābikaśarira*, which, being subtle (*sūkṣma*), has a greater resemblance to the soul than the gross or material body. In this interpretation Bhāsarvajña transposes

26. Cf. *Nyāyabhāṣanam* 394, 8-12.

27. *angusthamātraḥ puruṣo'ntarātmā sadā jananam hṛdaye sanniviṣṭaḥ*

the attribute 'having the size of the thumb' from the individual soul to the subtle body that enables its transmigration.

In a second interpretation of the same passage Bhāsarvajña takes the word *purusa* to mean the Supreme Soul or *Īśvara* and applies to him the predicate 'having the size of the thumb' (*angusthamātra*). According to our author, even though the Supreme Soul is not 'of the size of the thumb', the predicate can be applied to him in a metaphorical or figurative sense (*upacāra*) in as much as the Supreme Soul is perceived by the Yogins as present in the 'region of the heart' (*hṛtpradeśa*), which is said to have the size of the thumb. Thus the attribute 'having the size of the thumb' is transferred from the *purusa* not to the Supreme Soul, but to the heart where this latter is said to reside!²⁸

A third instance of Bhāsarvajña's manner of interpretation of Veda is found in his explanation of the Upanisadic passage *Svet. Up. III, 8* where we read: "I know this Great Person, having the colour of the sun (*ādityavarṇa*), [abiding] beyond the darkness"²⁹ Standing outside the domain of the material elements, which alone can possess colour, the Great Person, or the Supreme Soul called *Īśvara*, cannot be said to possess any colour in the literal sense. Nevertheless, he can be said to 'have the colour of the sun,' explains our author, in a metaphorical sense (*upacaryate*) on account of his absolute spotlessness (*atyantanirmalatvāt*).³⁰

After giving us these models of interpreting the apparently contradictory Vedic passages, Bhāsarvajña states something like a general principle to be followed wherever similar cases occur;

In this manner, the meaning of other [Vedic] statements also must be grasped with due intelligence, as being free from contradiction. And one should not, on the contrary, grasp [them] as invalid, when one cannot understand them according to their real meaning, either due to poverty of intelligence or due to laziness.³¹

28. Cf. *Nyāyabhāṣanam* 394, 12-16.

29. *vedāham etam puruṣam mahāntam ādityavarṇam tarasah parastāt.*

30. Cf. *Nyāyabhāṣanam* 394, 14-15.

31. *Ibid.* 394, 16-18: *ity evan anyeṣāṃ api [veda] vakyānam avirodhena yatnato'rthaḥ pratipattavyo, na tu prajñādāridryāt ālasyad va yathartha-pratipattyaśaktāu aprāmānyam pratipattavyam iti.*

At the close of our brief consideration of Bhāsarvajña's manner of interpreting some Vedic passages we may thus formulate his standpoint: Since Iśvara, who is supremely trustworthy, is the author of the Veda, there *cannot* be any error or contradiction in it. Therefore, any contradiction, which one may adduce, can only be apparent, produced by a lack of understanding of the right meaning of the Veda. Hence, in the presence of such apparent contradictions one should diligently try to discover the true sense of the Vedic passage in question, and then the apparent contradictions will disappear. In any case, while interpreting the Veda care should be taken to interpret it as being without any contradiction.

V

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika author, whose manner of interpretation of the Veda we shall next consider, is Udayana, one of the foremost representatives of the school, who lived between 950 and 1060 A.D. Among his works the *Atmatattvaviveka* and the *Nyāyakusumāñjali* offer us some material on the interpretation of the Veda, and the *Atmatattvaviveka*, while dealing with the validity of the Veda, and the *Nyāyakusumāñjali*, after giving some of the proofs for the existence of Iśvara.

In answering the objection of the opponents, who disclaimed validity of the Veda on the ground that it has the defects of untruthfulness, contradictions and repetition, Udayana holds that these defects cannot be ascribed to the Veda since the Vedic passages—which are said to be invalid on account of these defects—have a meaning different from the one that is apparent and that which is assumed by the opponents. Thus the Vedic passages, which speak of the unreality of the visible world (*prapañca-mithyātva*), are not untrue (*anṛta*), as the opponents claim on the basis of a wrong interpretation of the passage in question; for what these passages really want to convey is that those who are desirous of attaining liberation should strive after the attainment of the knowledge of the soul in as much as it is not subject to extension or manifoldness belonging to this world (*nisprapañca ātman*); in other words, knowledge of the soul in as much as it is in itself without being related to the body. Likewise, the Vedic passages speaking of non-dualism (*advaitāsruti*) do not contradict other passages in which plurality of reality is recognized; for they are meant to point out that it is only the knowledge of one's own soul, which is without a second (*advitiya*), that leads to libera-

tion. In the same way, repetitions in the Veda are not a defect; for repetitions are meant to help the understanding of the communicated truth, which is difficult to grasp (*durūha*).³² In this manner, the objections of untruthfulness, contradictions and repetition brought forward by the opponents against the validity of the Veda are based on an incorrect understanding of the intended meaning of the Vedic passages in question.

In this context Udayana gives, in the terse style that characterizes all his works, his interpretations of some more Vedic passages. To mention but one among them, the Vedic texts declaring the soul (*ātman*) to be of the nature of bliss (*ānanda*)—such as, for instance, *Taitt. Up.* II, 5, 1 and II, 8, 1—, a statement which goes against the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika doctrine of the nature of the soul, are meant to point out that it is the soul alone which should be made the object of our strivings. Although the soul enjoys no bliss in the state of liberation, one should strive after the liberation of the soul with as much effort and enthusiasm as if the liberated soul enjoyed bliss.³³

These examples may suffice to illustrate Udayana's manner of interpretation of Vedic texts in the context of establishing the validity of the Veda.

VI

The second context in which Udayana offers us illustrations of his manner of interpreting Vedic texts is in his proofs for the existence of Iśvara³⁴ in the fifth chapter of his *Nyāyakusumāñjali*. After advancing arguments from reason he quotes, in many cases, some Vedic passages to support his rational argument for the existence of Iśvara and also gives interpretations of some of these passages.

Thus, at the end of his first proof, wherein he establishes the existence of Iśvara as the 'creator' (*kartr*) of the earth etc., which are effects (*kārya*), the author of the *Nyāyakusumāñjali* quotes a Vedic verse, which may be translated thus:

32. *Āmatattvaviveka* (ed. used is: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, No. 84; Benares 1940), 375, 7-376, 4.

33. Cf. *ibid.* 376, 5-6.

34. For Udayana's proofs for the existence of Iśvara, see G. Chemparathy, *op. cit.* pp. 77-137.

With eyes on all sides, with mouths on all sides, with hands on all sides and feet on all sides, the one God, while creating heaven and earth, welds [them] with his hands and wings.³⁵

After quoting this verse, Udayana explains it, interpreting it as follows:

Here with the first [bodily part, namely, the eye, is indicated] omniscience (*sarvajñatva*); for vision is indicated by 'eye'. With the second [namely, mouth, is meant] that he is the teacher (lit. 'speaker') of everyone [or everything] (*sarvavakṛtva*); for speech is indicated by 'mouth'. With the third [namely, hand, is meant] his co-agency in all [actions] (*sarvasahakāritva*); for co-agency is indicated by 'hand'. With the fourth [namely, feet, is meant] his all-pervasiveness (*vyapakatva*, i.e. omnipresence); for pervasion (i.e. presence) is indicated by 'foot'. With the fifth [namely, the two hands, is meant] the important causality of what are called merit and demerit; for it is they that maintain the course of worldly existence. (*lokayārrā*). With the sixth [namely, wings, is meant] that he directs the material cause, which has the form of atoms; for on account of their nature of movement (*galīśīla*) they have the designation of 'wings' in as much as they (as it were) 'fly'. The words *samdhāmati* (= 'he welds') and *sañjanayan* (= 'creating, producing') have their [syntactical] connection with the affix [*sam*] placed apart [in the Vedic text].³⁶ Hence the meaning is that 'he connects' [and by doing so] 'he creates' [heaven and earth]. With [the word] 'heaven' is indicated the seven upper worlds; [with the word] 'earth', [the seven worlds] below. 'One' (*eka*) [means] 'beginninglessness (*anāditva*)'.³⁷

A beautiful and original interpretation indeed! In the original context this verse is found in a hymn to Viśvakarman, 'the All-

35. *Nyāyākusumāñjali* (ed. used is: Kashi Sanskrit Series, No. 30; Benares, 1957), 503, 2-3: *visvataspāt*

viśvataścakṣur uta viśvatomukho viśvatobāhur uta sam bāhubhyām dhāmati sam patatrair dyāvābhūmī janayan deva ekaḥ //

36. Meant is that the affix *sam*, though placed apart from the words *dhāmati* and *janayan* in the Vedic text, should be prefixed to them, thus forming the words *samdhāmati* and *sañjanayan*.

37. *Nyāyākusumāñjali* 503, 4-10.

maker', represented in *Rgveda* X. 81.3 as a smith in his act of creation of the universe. The application of these lines to *Īśvara* takes place rather smoothly, but the words are given a philosophical sense proper to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika system. The explanation is ingenious, though at times rather arbitrary, such as when Udayana explains at the end of the above passage the word *eka* (= 'one') to mean *anāditva* (= 'beginninglessness').

Similarly, after the proof based on 'support' (*dhṛti*), wherein the existence of *Īśvara* is proved from the fact that the universe, though heavy, does not fall down, and consequently there must be a person who supports it, the author of the *Nyāyākusumāñjali* argues that the scriptural passages, which speak of Indra, Agni, Yama etc. as the protectors of the world (*lokapāla*), are to be interpreted as referring to *Īśvara*, who is the supporter (and thereby also the 'protector') of the universe. In this connection our author points out that the Vedic passages such as "All this is nothing but the Self" (*ātmaivedam sarvam*), which apparently express the identity or oneness of all things with the Self are to be interpreted as meaning that *Īśvara* penetrates or permeates all things (*sarvāveśa*). Udayana means to say that it is through the 'entrance' (*āveśa*) or permeation of *Īśvara* in all things that he is said to support the universe. Furthermore, he points out that the scriptural passages wherein tortoise (*kūrma* or other animals (such as the serpent *Seṣa*) are said to support the universe, are to be interpreted as referring to *Īśvara* who, taking their form, supports the universe.³⁹

In another proof, wherein Udayana establishes the existence of *Īśvara* from the fact that the Vedic sentences require a person who combines the words, he quotes in support of his argument the *Rgvedic* verse: "From this completely offered sacrifice were born the verses and the melodies (meant thereby are the *Rgveda* and the *Sāmaveda*)".⁴⁰ This verse, found in the famous hymn to the Purusa, refers in the original context to the Ur-Person whom the gods sacrificed and out of whom all things are said to originate.

38. Cf. *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* VII, 25, 2; VII 26, 1. Included are probably also passages such as *sarvaṃ khalu idaṃ brahma*, as found, for instance, in *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* III, 14, 1.

39. Cf. *Nyāyākusumāñjali* 506, 1-4; 506, 16-17. Similar statements that the Vedic text speaking of Brahmā, Rudra etc. are to be interpreted as referring to *Īśvara* are found *ibid*, 503, 11; 507, 7; 508, 20.

40. *Rgveda* X. 90. 9: *tasmād yajñāt sarvahuta ṛcaḥ sāmāni jajñire*.

Udayana identifies this Ur-Person with *Iśvara* from whom, according to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas, the Vedas have sprung into being.⁴¹

VII

The foregoing description gives us some idea of the manner in which the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika thinkers have interpreted some passages of the Veda. As already stated at the beginning, these thinkers did not write commentaries on the Vedic texts nor did they make the interpretation of Veda an essential part of their teaching. However, they certainly made use of *some* Vedic passages in their philosophical reasonings' though very rarely. After having considered, by means of a few illustrations, their method and manner of interpreting some Vedic passages, we may now draw a few conclusions as regards their position among the classical Indian thinkers as interpreters of Veda.

Firstly, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas cannot be said to hold an important position among Indian thinkers as interpreters of Veda, nor have they formulated a set of rules of Vedic interpretation as the Mīmāṃsakas have done. This can be easily accounted for by their primary interest in philosophy, namely, correct logical thinking and natural philosophy, both of which have no direct basis on or relation to the Veda. They indeed accepted, like all orthodox Hindu thinkers, the absolute validity (*prāmānya*) of the Veda and justified its validity by making the supremely trustworthy *Iśvara* its author.

Secondly, since the Veda itself cannot be untrue or contradictory, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas seek to remove any discrepancy between the apparent meaning of a given Vedic passage and the tenets of their school by an interpretation of the Vedic passage in question in terms of, and in conformity with, their own doctrines. Such a method of interpretation, however ingenious tends to be rather subjective and arbitrary. The interpretation of *Svet. Up. IV, 5* (which we have mentioned in our study) in terms of their atomic doctrine, in spite of its Sāṃkhyistic background in its original context, is an instance in point.

Thirdly, in the final analysis, the principle of Vedic interpretation followed by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas seems to be that an

41. Cf. *Nyāyakusumāñjali* 511. 1-6.

interpretation of Veda that conforms to the teachings of *their* school is legitimate and valid, while an interpretation which does not accord with the tenets of *their* system is illegitimate and invalid. It would be unjust to find fault with the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas for following such a line of interpretation; for all the Indian schools, as a matter of fact, follow such a method to a greater or lesser degree as is clear from the interpretation of Vedic texts especially by the Mīmāṃsakas and the Vedāntins,⁴² and among the different schools of Vedānta itself. The Vedānta system is primarily based on the Upanisads; the different schools of Vedānta—monism, qualified monism, and dualism, to mention but the most important among them—claim, despite their great differences in doctrines, to be derived from the same Vedic texts, the Upanisads. Hinduism and its schools of thought did not have a central teaching authority (*magisterium*), which could claim to be the source of the authentic interpretation of the Veda, and consequently each school was free to interpret the Vedic texts in its own way.

It is surprising that although *Iśvara* is accepted by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas as the sole author (*karṇ, vaktṛ, prokṛ*) of the whole Veda,⁴³ they do not *explicitly* state that the Veda is to be interpreted in the sense in which *Iśvara* meant it to be understood. There would also be the problem of how a person can be certain that the meaning grasped by him corresponds to what was 'intended' or meant by *Iśvara*. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas believe that *Iśvara* is not only the author of the Veda but also its 'explainer' (*vyākhyātṛ*).⁴⁴ It is, however, not very clear from the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika texts themselves in what sense *Iśvara* is to be understood as the 'explainer' of the Veda. The texts seem to imply merely that while proclaiming the Veda to the first living beings, *Iśvara* made the exact meaning of the Veda very clear to these first hearers. One might, nevertheless, pose the question why *Iśvara* proclaims the Veda, which contains some passages that at least appear contradictory, especially since he is said to be moved

42. Cf. for instance, Sankara's interpretation of *Svet. Up. IV, 5* in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* I, 4, 8-10, as mentioned in note 23.

43. Some implications of this with regard to the problem of truth in the Veda, in comparison with the truth in the Bible, have been discussed in my forthcoming book: *Le Veda et la Bible: Parole de Dieu*, in the series *Homos Religiosus*, published by the University of Louvain.

44. Cf. *Nyāyakusumāñjali* 522, 10-523, 3; *Nyāyabhūṣanam* 105, 6-7. G. Chemparathy, *op. cit.* pp. 114-118.

to proclaim the Veda out of compassion for the living beings, which are undergoing the pains of repeated births and deaths. No doubt the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas will answer that the apparent contradictions in the Veda are due not to fault of Iśvara himself, but to the 'poverty of intellect' (*prajñādāridraya*) or/and laziness (*ālasya*) on the part of the human hearers of the Veda. As Tantrism argues, the Veda is beyond the grasp of the present generation. And the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas themselves believe, like the Indian thinkers in general, in the progressive degeneration of the physical and moral powers of man, which results in the gradual decrease of the study of the Veda in the succeeding aeons (*yuga*).⁴⁵ And we are now living in the last and the worst of the aeons, the Kaliyuga, in which the physical and moral powers of the human beings are at their lowest and in which religiosity (*dharmā*) has become so weak that it is said to 'have [only] one foot' (*ekapāt*), while it had four feet (*catuṣpāt*) in the Kṛtayuga, the first and the best of the four aeons.⁴⁶

45. Cf., for example, *Nyāyākusumāñjali* 292. 10-293, 15.

46. Cf. *ibid.* 293, 12-13.