

Introduction

CHRISTOPHER KEY CHAPPLE

This book seeks to elucidate the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* and its view of self and world. The late Gerald Larson hailed Sāṃkhya as the foundation for all aspects of Indian philosophy. Sāṃkhya spans the fields of physics, metaphysics, psychology, and ethics. Its intent is soteriological: Sāṃkhya charts a pathway to freedom. Notably not theological, its key premises and observations overlap with virtually all religious traditions that originate from India.

Sāṃkhya espouses a reciprocity between Prakṛti, the realm of activity, and Puruṣa, the silent witness. It also delineates the phenomenal experiences that arise from Prakṛti, including the operations of the human body, the five great elements, and mental states. Its foundational ideas can be found in *R̥g Veda* 1.164.20, also quoted in the *Maṇḍuka* and *Śvetāśvatara* Upaniṣads: “Two birds associated together, and mutual friends, take refuge in the same tree; one of them eats the sweet fig; the other abstaining from food, merely looks on.” The active bird symbolizes Prakṛti and the bird looking on serves as a metaphor for Puruṣa.

The legacy of Sāṃkhya studies is vast, stretching back at least 1500 years. Gauḍapāda’s commentary or Bhāṣya (sixth century) was brought into English translation by T. G. Mainkar, who acknowledges the works of “Colebrooke, Wilson, S. Sastri, N. A. Sastri, Har Dutt Sharma, Sovani . . . Keith, Takakusu, Jacobi, Dasgupta, [and] Radhakrishnan” as important resources for his own work. He also consulted the unattributed *Yuktidīpikā* as he prepared the

second edition of his translation.¹ Gerald James Larson opened a new chapter on Sāṃkhya studies with *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of Its History and Meaning* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1969, 1979), his volume on Sāṃkhya in the *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (1987), and his final work, *Classical Yoga Philosophy and the Legacy of Sāṃkhya* (2018).

The appeal of Sāṃkhya can be summarized in comments made by two late scholars, Bhagwan B. Singh (Philosophy, University of Nevada, Las Vegas) and Frank Podgorski (Religious Studies, Seton Hall). Bhagwan Singh saw Sāṃkhya as a perfect fit for those inclined toward existentialism. For him, Sāṃkhya avoids the pitfall of religious belief. Its arguments rest upon empirical evidence, starting with the Buddhist-like acknowledgement of human suffering. In his commentary on the Īśvara section of the *Yoga Sūtra* (I:23–29), Singh notes that “the highest freedom is to be attained only by the highest knowledge and its cause, highest non-attachment, which includes non-attachment to the divine objects also. Further, God is not conceived here as a creator or controller of the world.”² Singh asserts that Īśvara serves as an object for meditation, not as an external power to be worshipped. Singh writes that Yoga itself, due its grounding in Sāṃkhya, “is opposed to any kind of metaphysical and epistemological idealism.”³

For Podgorski, Sāṃkhya provided a blueprint for a universal spirituality. Its call for dispositional improvement bridges the gap between a life without purpose and one driven by dogma or blind religious belief. Like Singh, Podgorski applauds Sāṃkhya’s empiricism, likening it to the thought of Hegel: “Somewhat like the *aufhebung* of which Hegel speaks, life’s very experience itself may be regarded as an enriching revelation.”⁴ Podgorski, alluding to Prakṛti, defines “matter” as “our natural environment, our foundational habitat” noting that “matter” concerned Jean Paul Sarte, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Claude Levi-Strauss. He asserts that Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur “all testify that matter, particularly that matter which embraces each person, both reveals and yet conceals our real nature and authentic identity.”⁵ Affirming its psychological emphasis, he writes “Sāṃkhyan analysis has sharpened our understanding of the depths of individuality . . . suggests that each individual is far more than body, Ego, mind, or even the entire psyche . . . [it] points to a spiritual

core or center as our deepest human dimension.”⁶ For Podgorski, Sāṃkhya dealt not with abstractions but the very stuff of human emotions, including suffering and the possibility of freedom.

Sāṃkhya provides a Zen-like paradox that denies fixed identity. At the moment of freedom, the liberated person proclaims: Nothing to do! Nothing to be! Nothing to own! When the dancer (the ego) ceases to dance, a moment of awareness dawns, along with a catharsis that unburdens attachment. After carefully delineating the relationship between ontology and psychology in the first five dozen verses, the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* reaches up into the realm of metaphor by evoking the delicate interplay between the dancer and the one who watches the dance in the last dozen verses. However, the text does not hypothesize about the people who actually experience freedom or what happens in the afterlife, other than to cite yet another metaphor: the spinning of the potter’s wheel.

Perhaps because of its perceived ambivalence concerning the relationship between consciousness and reality and its somewhat perplexing use of metaphor, Buddhists, Jains, and Vedāntins point out inconsistencies in Sāṃkhya. Like the Buddhists, Sāṃkhya calls for the extirpation of ego. Like the Jains, Sāṃkhya proclaims the reality of things in the world and the existence of multiple points of consciousness. Like the Vedāntins, Sāṃkhya seeks to reverse suffering. However, Sāṃkhya does not assent to the idea of no-self as found in Buddhism, though it includes the dramatic proclamation of being freed from ego: *nāham, nāsmi, na me*. Unlike the Jainism, it does not profess or promote an ethical code. It contradicts Vedānta by eschewing all language that would point toward a non-dual experience. Prakṛti is real, not illusory. Prakṛti does not join with Puruṣa, nor does Puruṣa join with Prakṛti. Sāṃkhya remains a tradition of difference. It does not proclaim union. Although it holds much in common with other philosophies of India, Sāṃkhya remains distinct, not unlike the pure points of consciousness that it lauds.

Christopher P. Miller emphasizes soteriology in summarizing Sāṃkhya:

The *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* begins with the assertion that to be alive is to suffer (*duḥkha*) (verse 1). The text asserts that Sāṃkhya has been passed down with compassion as a lasting means to assist aspirants in their quest to coun-

teract this suffering through the cultivation of spiritual knowledge that dispels ignorance (*ajñāna*) and eventually leads to the realization of the inherent freedom of one's consciousness (*puruṣa*) (see verses 1, 62, and 70). Sāṃkhya provides the prescription for attaining this knowledge via the disciplined analysis (*tattva-abhyāsa*) of twenty-five fundamental and irreducible categories of reality known as *tattvas* (verse 64). Taken together, the twenty-five *tattvas* (literally "thatnesses"), which are the basic building blocks of all experience, provide a comprehensive schema to help one understand the ongoing, indissoluble link between the physical world, the body, and emotional and mental experience. By realizing the way in which this schema repeatedly unfolds, one gains knowledge (*jñāna*) of the ontological difference between one's pure, indwelling consciousness (*puruṣa*) and the entire emotional-mental-physical matrix (*prakṛti*). To possess such knowledge is tantamount to the experience of liberation (*kaivalya*) from suffering existence.⁷

Sāṃkhya's core principles have come to suffuse virtually all aspects of Indian thought, from its careful assessment of physical realities to its call for emotional refinement. Its influence has been taken up in numerous works in the above-mentioned books by Gerald Larson.

The importance of Sāṃkhya can be gleaned in two key texts: the *Yoga Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The *Yoga Sūtra* embeds a summary of Sāṃkhya in its second book, 15–26. It asserts the reality of suffering caused by fluctuations of the *guṇas* and proclaims that discernment through the *jñāna bhāva* is essential for freedom:

II.15. For the discriminating one, all is suffering due to the conflict of the fluctuations of the *guṇas* and by the sufferings due to *pariṇāma* (outward flow of the senses), sorrow, and *saṃskāra* (past conditioning).

II.16. The suffering yet to come is to be avoided.

II.17. The cause of what is to be avoided is the confusion of the Seer with the Seen.

II.18. The Seen has the qualities of light, activity, and inertia, consists for the elements and the senses, and has the purposes of experience and liberation.

II.19. The distinct, the indistinct, the designator, and the unmanifest are the divisions of the *guṇas*.

II.20. The Seer only sees; though pure, it appears intentional.

II.21. The nature of the Seen is only for the purpose of that (Puruṣa).

II.22. When [its] purpose is done, [the Seen] disappears; otherwise it does not disappear due to being common to others.

II.23. Confusion (*saṃyoga*) results when one perceives two powers of owner [Puruṣa] and owned [Prakṛti] as (one) self-form.

II.24. The cause of it is ignorance.

II.25. From the absence [of ignorance], confusion ceases; [this is] the escape, the isolation from Seen.⁸

Īśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* is quite succinct, yet Patañjali manages to further condense its core ideas into these eleven short statements. Specifically, the first two statements encapsulate the first Kārikā and its concern to overcome sufferings. The definition of ignorance in YS II:17 points to verses 59–68 of the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*. The discussion of the *guṇas* in YS II:18–19 summarizes several verses in the SK, including 11–16, 22–36, 38, 46, and 60. The allusion to the Seer and the Seen in YS 20–22 can be found explicitly taken up in more than 40 SK verses (3–11 17–21, 51–69).

Similarly, *Sāṃkhya* pervades the *Bhagavad Gītā* of the *Mahābhārata*.⁹ Chapter II of the *Gītā* equates knowledge of the undying self with the wisdom of *Sāṃkhya* (II:39). Starting with

verse II:45 Krishna repeatedly urges Arjuna to rid himself of identification with the three *guṇas*. Paraphrasing the no-ego proclamation of *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* 63 (*nāham, nāsmi, na me*), Krishna urges Arjuna to adopt the attitude of “I am not doing anything at all” (*naiva kiṃcit karomīti*) in BG V:8. Krishna describes his own being as possessing the eightfold Prakṛti: the five great elements (*bhūmi, āp, anala, vāyu, kha*), the mind (*manas*), the “intellect” (*buddhi*) and ego (*ahaṃkāra*, BG VII:4) as well as a higher nature (*parām-jīvabhūtāṃ*, VII:5). Krishna again invokes the *guṇas*, reminding Arjuna not to identify with any of them (VII:12–14). Chapter XIII starts with a concise summary of the principles of *Sāṃkhya*: Puruṣa, Prakṛti, and the various states (*tattvas*). Chapter XIV describes each of the *guṇas* vividly, giving examples of how goodness (*sattva*), passion (*rajas*) and dullness (*tamas*) pervade things and attitudes. Chapter XVII characterizes forms of religious practice according to varying degrees of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* concludes with an assessment of renunciation, actions, knowledge, and happiness through the prism of the three *guṇas* in chapter XVIII. In a certain sense, Arjuna moves from profound sadness and an inability to act (*tamas*) in the first chapter to, by the end of the *Gītā*, a place of engaged action (*rajas*) informed by a sense of the higher good (*sattva*). Krishna systematically instructs Arjuna to see all aspects of reality through the *Sāṃkhya* prism of the three *guṇas*, allowing him to become a Seer and not a victim of identifying with what is seen.

This volume revisits the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* in three primary ways: translation, meaning of its content, and various ways of reception and interpretation. The intent is to make the text more accessible, shedding light on its internal complexity as well as its philosophical, ethical, and cultural implications.

First, this book presents a new and readable translation of this text, which finds itself in a genre unto its own. Though seen primarily as philosophical text, it also passes as a work of literature, replete with metaphors and a tinge of mystery. Composed in a complex rhythmic meter, it invites a read-aloud experience. The Āryā meter, a bit like a sonnet or haiku, requires enunciation and counting, and defies ready translation. Rather than attempting anything nearly as clever as Edgerton’s brilliant translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* which replicates both word order and syllabification

as best possible, we have chosen to render the text in blank verse, the American-English modality that also invites reading aloud in a punctuated manner. More on the technical aspects of the translation can be found at the start of chapter 5.

Second, the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* holds tremendous metaphysical, physical, and soteriological import. Its six dozen verses describe the human experience of suffering, lay out its logical methods and premises, articulate consciousness in relationship with material realities, probe the depths of human psychology, and chart a pathway to freedom. Its principles and practices have been absorbed into the fabric of virtually all systems of Indian thought. Like Buddhism, it acknowledges the difficulties inherent in life. Its delineation of the five elements, the five senses, the five action organs, and the five rudiments of experience draws from the Vedas and the Upaniṣads as well as Buddhist and Jaina canonical literature. The building blocks of reality (*tattvas*) enunciated in Sāṃkhya are found in all Indic speculative cosmological traditions. Its articulation of the complex relationship between the unmanifest and the manifest world presages the Vedānta heralding of the two forms of Brahman: with form (*saguṇa*) and without form (*nirguṇa*). Sāṃkhya's itemization of states of existence (*bhāvas*) parallels the enumerations found in the various Buddhist Abhidharma texts and the lists of forms of karma (*prakṛtis*) delineated in Jaina literature.¹⁰

Sāṃkhya's core principles of Puruṣa and Prakṛti signal consciousness and activity respectively. They find gendered expressions both in narratives of gods (*devas*) and goddesses (*devīs*) and in the dynamics of human relationships. The dance of Prakṛti serves to entertain and liberate the conscious awareness of the Puruṣa. Just as the wrinkle of the Moebius strip frees the mind of binary thinking, so also, the quelling of the dance frees awareness from the shackles of attachment, powerlessness, and duty. By applying a single twist to a strip of paper and joining it end to end, the downside of the paper becomes the upside of the paper. Similarly, by applying the focus of attentive knowledge to all karmic circumstances, one can repeatedly untie the knots that confine human behavior. The platform of human impulse (*buddhi*), the constantly self-referential ego (*ahaṃkāra*), and the wandering mind (*manas*) become transparent in such moments of release. Lethargy and passion (*tamas* and *rajas*) give way to enlightenment (*sattva*).

Third, this volume includes an array of interpretive voices. As Gerald Larson once famously proclaimed, Sāṃkhya is not merely one of the six traditional schools of Indian thought (*śad-darśana*). The principles and inherent call to action embedded in Sāṃkhya inform all schools of Indian thought, even beyond its five companions that describe logic (Nyāya), ritual (Mīmāṃsa), physicality (Vaiśeṣika), theology (Vedānta), and spiritual practice (Yoga). As noted above, elements of the Buddhist and Jaina traditions exist in dynamic conversation with Sāṃkhya. Sāṃkhya categories find expression in the literature of the Mahābhārata and the practices of Yoga. Furthermore, to the extent that the three *guṇas* undergird social organization and dietary and by extension health practices, Sāṃkhya informs the day to life of South Asia regardless of religious ideology.

Five scholars weigh in on various philosophical and psychological aspects of the tradition following the translation. Geoffrey Ashton takes up the great mystery of Sāṃkhya: how does the stuff of circumstance serve to inform and liberate awareness? Ashton articulates the bridge between the two in a new way. He renders the all-important term *saṃyoga* as compresence. When Prakṛti comes into proximity of awareness or Puruṣa she vibrates and performs. When she fulfills this functionality and ends her dance, Puruṣa enters a state of repose, a moment of fulfilment and peace. Ashton explores the chief premise of this reciprocal exchange: without experience, there can be no freedom. Ana Funes turns to the *Yuktidīpikā*, a text designated as a commentary yet complete within itself, interpreting its account of the five breaths (*prāṇas*) that enliven experience. Without breath, there can be no life. How does breath take expression? What role can knowledge play? Mikel Burley chooses a philosophical path: given that freedom stands as the primary motivating factor for taking up a life guided by Sāṃkhya, what ethical imperatives must be followed? Chapple provides a close textual reading to suggest how the general patterning of the *guṇas* yields a complex analysis of states of being (*bhāvas*) that must be understood and mastered to advance to the goal of freedom. Srivatsa Ramaswami explores the centrality of one's state of mind (*pratyaya*) in the study and practice of Sāṃkhya and Yoga.

The next section of the text explores concrete forms and applications of Sāṃkhya. More than a hundred years ago, Hariharānanda Āraṇya created a community that seeks to live by the Sāṃkhya code. Marzenna Jakubczak describes visits to the Kapil Math community in West Bengal, which continues this tradition through following a monastic form of Sāṃkhya. She notes that the Sāṃkhya practitioners there employ a practice similar to modern adaptations of Buddhist mindful awareness practice. McKim Marriott revisits his original field notes from the 1950s, mapping village life onto the Sāṃkhya schematic, noting the ubiquity and universality of the Sāṃkhya architectonic. The last paper in this section, by Alfred Collins, gives a nuts-and-bolts applied interpretation of Sāṃkhya from a psychotherapeutic perspective.

The book ends with a grammatical analysis of the text by Robert Zabel. By exploring the vocabulary of the text through its roots and possible translation terms, and by pointing out the vagaries of breaking apart compound words, a toolbox is given for readers to construct their own approach to the text, and to more fully discern the choices made by earlier translators.

This book arose from a conference of the same name convened under the auspices of the Master of Arts in Yoga Studies program at Loyola Marymount University in 2015. The presentations may be viewed on the LMU Yoga Studies YouTube channel. The preparation of this book entailed the hard work of all the participants in the conference and those who have contributed to this volume. Special appreciation goes to the staff of SUNY Press, to Gayatri Sehgal for preparing the beautiful cover, and to Gabrielle Sigrist, graduate assistant and student in LMU's Yoga Studies MA program.

Notes

1. T. G. Mainkar, *Sāṃkhyakārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa with the Commentary of Gauḍapāda* (Delhi: Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishthan, 1964, 1972).
2. Bhagwan B. Singh, *Yoga Siddhi: Yoga Sutras of Patanjali with Commentary* (Las Vegas, NV: International Institute of American and Indian Studies, 1997), 11.
3. *Ibid.*, 82.

4. Frank R. Podgorski, *Ego Revealer-Concealer, A Key to Yoga* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 64.

5. *Ibid.*, xii.

6. *Ibid.*, 156.

7. Christopher P. Miller, "Sāṃkhya" in Pankaj Jain et al. (eds.), *Hinduism and Tribal Religions, Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*, Springer 2018, online resource consulted January 21, 2023 https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-94-024-1188-1_45

8. Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 123–124.

9. Extensive analysis of Sāṃkhya can also be found in the *Mokṣadharmā Parvaṇ* of the *Mahābhārata* as studied by Jayadeva Yogendra, James Fitzgerald, Angelika Malinar, Knut Jacobsen, and John Brockington.

10. See Th. Schterbatsky, *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word "Dharma"* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1923) and Helmuth von Glasenapp, *The Doctrine of Karman in Jain Philosophy* (Varanasi: Parshvanath Research Institute, 1942).