

# The Metaphysics of the Word: A Study of Bhartṛhari's *Śabdādvaitavāda*

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Since the 1950s when philosophy took a 'linguistic turn' academic philosophers of U.K and America have declared loud and clear that "metaphysics is dead". Also those of us trained in Western analytic tradition have unabashedly followed the dictum and still believe that discussing metaphysics is below our dignity. Naturally, the topic of my discussion here may seem violate the diktat. Yet I decide to write something on metaphysics as I strongly feel that it is a significant aspect of our cognitive pursuit. Along with our passion for the facts and certainty we have a passion for rationality too. In this context I am reminded of a very significant plea made by William James in support of the human need for indulging in metaphysics. He reasons out that we delve into metaphysics because of our "desire to attain a conception of the frame of things which shall be on the whole more rational than that chaotic view which every one by nature carries about with him under his hat."<sup>1</sup> Man is always in search of a better consistency and clarity in his framework of thought. Understood in this sense, metaphysics as an intellectual pursuit does not aim at solving the mysteries of the trans-empirical realities. It is another name for thought that seeks self-consistency. So metaphysics as an intellectual pursuit is not primarily an investigation into ontology, but an analysis of certain basic concepts, that is characterized by a better power to offer a consistent view of life and the universe. This consistency comes from the human propensity for rationality. However, we must remember that the postulates that a metaphysician holds close to his heart can neither be proved nor disproved. They are simply postulates; and in their manipulation of concepts sometimes philosophers rely on this or that concept heavily. They pull this or that string of the conceptual net and the net appears in this or that shape. We may label this tendency of the conceptual net and the net appears in this or that shape. Following Strawson<sup>2</sup> we may label this tendency of the metaphysicians, a form of "intellectual imperialism". Thus the philosophers have a tendency to produce strikingly different world-picture dominated by a specific concept, representing a particular attitude or interest. If the monists put stress on the concept of 'unity' then the pluralists see more rationality in the concept of 'plurality'. Accordingly, they present the rational and conceptual scheme in such a way that every thing suits the scheme of concepts. Despite such imperialism, metaphysics is not a spurious activity. It has use in any form, whether the metaphysician presents a descriptive or a revisionary form of metaphysics. I intend to discuss a metaphysical position that is dominated by

the concept of language/word. We know that in the last few decades philosophers have been obsessed with the concept of language and this obsession has almost become the (to borrow a phrase from Gilbert Ryle<sup>3</sup>) 'occupational disease' of the modern philosophers. Yet nowhere we come across a system of thought entirely structured around the concept of the Word (language). This philosophical position presented by the 5<sup>th</sup> century grammarian philosopher Bhartṛhari not only presents a strikingly distinctive picture of the word and the world, but also makes us realize the importance of the phenomenon called language. For him the human understanding of the concepts of existence, consciousness and action that determine our comprehension of the world are primarily and essentially rooted in the concept of *Śabda Brahman*. This is the non-dual and unique Reality. Therefore his metaphysical position is also known as *Śabdādvaitavāda* (Linguistic non-dualism).

In the classical Indian tradition, however, the concept of language has always played an important role in the philosophical quest. In fact the inquisitiveness about 'language' as a concept is as old as the Indian civilization itself. J.F. Stall very rightly observes, "at times almost excessive preoccupation with language on the one hand and with philosophy on the other may indeed be regarded as the characteristic of Indian civilization."<sup>4</sup> This is evident from the fact that *Rg Veda*, one of the oldest scriptures of India contains innumerable insightful remarks about the nature of *śabda* (language) and *vāk* (speech). This fascination was more articulately presented in the philosophical scriptures and texts of the subsequent period. Some modern thinkers like B.K. Matilal are of the opinion that Bhartṛhari was one of the earliest exponents of Advaitism, later on made more explicit by Śaṅkarācārya.

Before I explicate the philosophical nuances of a distinctively different genre of Advaitism advocated by Bhartṛhari I deem it necessary to say few words about this philosopher who was more misunderstood than understood in the philosophical tradition of India. He was in the true sense of the term the first philosopher of language in India, who dared to develop a metaphysics based on the famous upanisadic line—*vāk vai Brahman* (Word/the principle of speech is verily the Brahman).<sup>5</sup> Though his system of philosophy very prominently figures in the *Sarva darśanasamgraha* of Madhavācārya, yet Bhartṛhari rarely finds a mention in the standard textbooks on Indian philosophy. The reason for such omission is very obvious. Bhartṛhari was no part of the tradition of the *dārśanikas* or the accredited systems of philosophy, like, Sāṅkhya, Nyāya, etc. As far as his scholastic affiliation was concerned, Bhartṛhari belonged to the school of *Vaiyākaraṇikas* established by such great grammarians as Pāṇini and Patañjali. So the traditional philosophers never accorded him the status of a philosopher. Yet his work *Vākyapadīya* deals more with the philosophy of language than with the axioms of grammar. Therefore, it is no surprise that no great philosopher of India could avoid discussing the concepts and issues raised by him regarding the nature of *śabda* including Śaṅkara, Dīnāga and Jayanta Bhaṭṭa. This is one of the reasons why his fellow grammarians like Utpalācārya criticized him for transgressing the limits of grammar and dabbling in metaphysics. Such was the plight of a great thinker that he was disowned by the Grammarians as a metaphysician and was dismissed by them as a mere Grammarian. Fortunately, the interest in Bhartṛhari resurrected in the last two decades with the

obsession of the Western philosophers in the philosophy of language. With this brief introduction about Bhartṛhari I shall like to go straight in to his theory of non-dualism with special reference to his conception of the world and the word relationship.

Let me now try to explicate in brief Bhartṛhari's metaphysics centered on the concept of *śabdatattva*. I intend to undertake this job with the help of a seminal verse that occurs in the opening stanza of the first canto (also significantly known as *Brahma Kāṇḍa*) of his magnum opus—*Vākyapadīya*. He declares:

The Brahman is without beginning and end, whose essence is the Word (also translated as Word-essence, *Eternal verbum*) who is the cause of the manifested phonemes (speech), who appears as the objects, from whom the activities of the world proceed.

Anybody acquainted with the Upanisadic and Advaitin tradition may not feel much uncomfortable with the first half of this verse. *Brahman* in such traditions is presented as without change and hence without beginning and end. But ambiguity seems to creep in when one comes across the line "the word appears as objects and from which the activities of the world proceeds". This line at first glance seems mystical and also very uncritical. Yet this second half of the verse is the most crucial for understanding the basic philosophical position of Bhartṛhari. So I shall mostly concentrate on the analysis of this portion of the hymn, since the focus of my paper is to explore the relation between the word and the world. I feel that the clue to the understanding the above-mentioned line rests on our grasping of the word *śabda-tattva* as *Brahman*.

Very broadly understood *śabda* means sound. If we go for a stricter interpretation then *śabda* should mean "written or uttered string of sounds having a syntax and also meaning". This is the sense in which the term has been used in case of *śabda pramāṇa* by most of the philosophical systems in India. But for Bhartṛhari the term *śabda* can have a still more deep implication. It is the name of a complex phenomenon implying an activity as well as a principle. As an activity it is something in which all human beings are engaged. This activity is guided by particularized speech-pattern having syntax, meaning and expressing the intention of the speaker. The Sanskrit term that Bhartṛhari uses for this activity is *śabdāna vyāpāra*. Following Matilal we may translate it as "languageing". Again *śabda* may stand for a principle. This is the unitary and potential ground of all our conscious activities, including thought, conceptualization and our awareness of the phenomenal world. This principle itself is *śabda tattva* that is identified with the *Brahman*, the highest Reality. We know that in our Upanisadic tradition the highest Reality is called *Brahman*. Etymologically, the term *Brahman* is derived from the root *vrh* that means, 'to grow, to expand, to become great'. In its extended sense therefore *Brahman* means 'an all pervading principle'. For Bhartṛhari *śabda tattva* (the Word Principle) is *Brahman* as this principle pervades our thought, cognition, awareness and consciousness of the phenomenal world.

So far there seems to be no ambiguities in Bhartṛhari's position. But as I have stated, the problem starts with the second part of the stanza. Even if we take it for granted that *śabdatattva Brahman* is the highest Reality, does it not look incongruous

to claim that *śabdatattva* ‘appears as objects and all the phenomenal activities proceed from this’. Unless Bhartṛhari convincingly explains a logical and conceptual connection between the empirical world and the Reality, his metaphysical system is likely to collapse. So let us explore and examine Bhartṛhari’s own justifications for his claim.

We all know that the world of objects does not have anything common with the world of words. Objects are believed to be out there and we apply words to refer to them. But in his explanatory note on the verse mentioned above, Bhartṛhari provides an altogether different interpretation of ‘objects’. He says objects are *śabdopagrāhi*. In other words, objects are word-determined. Be it perception, inference or any other method, whenever we cognise objects we do so in terms of names. On the basis of names we identify objects and distinguish one class of objects from another. If objects are not nameable they are not identifiable, hence not cognizable. Our cognition on the other hand is *śabdopagrāhīya*, i.e., word-impregnated or intertwined with words. Our consciousness and cognition have a natural potency to act through words. Thus both cognition and objects, being word-generated, are in principle, dependent on the *śabda tattva*.

Regarding this unusual theory about the word-world relationship Bhartṛhari offers further justifications. He argues that the objects are identified as distinct objects once they are subsumed under a word or a name. Otherwise, the world of objects is unidentifiable and indistinguishable ‘something’. In other words, distinction is made between one object and another on the basis of words or names assigned to them. This theory of Bhartṛhari is in direct contrast to the Nyāya view about the cognition of objects. Gotama in his *Nyāyasūtra* (I. I. 4.) states non-verbalisability (*avyapadeśya*) as one of the characteristics of our cognition of objects. Elaborating on this point Vātsyāyana adds that our perception need not be always associated with verbalization, and there can always be non-linguistic cognition, i.e., (*nirvikalpa pratyakṣa*). So verbalization is not a condition of our cognition of the objects and the world. In support of his argument he cites the examples of a mute’s or a child’s perception. Bhartṛhari had already anticipated this objection. He says that even a mute or a child’s cognition is not without the element of the potency for verbalization. He clarifies that there can be two types of words, articulate words that are speakable, and non-articulate words that are unspeakable.<sup>6</sup> Non-articulate words refer to the linguistic potency of a child, for their actions are prompted by language.<sup>7</sup> In other words, a child may not be in a position to verbalise but that does not imply the absence linguistic potency in them. In short, ‘verbalisation’ and ‘verbalisability’ are not identical concepts. Our perceptual cognition need not be always articulated in verbal form. But that does not preclude the possibility of the potency for linguistic expressibility. In case of a mute the element of speech is not absolutely absent. Bhartṛhari specifies “speech inheres in all cases of awareness just as illumination does in fire and consciousness in the mind. The subtle nature of *vāc* (speech) penetrates and permeates even such states as lack of ostensive mental activity...”.<sup>8</sup> Even the bare awareness of objects (*nirvikalpa pratyakṣa*) is not possible without their being potent with cognitive discrimination (*pratyavamarśa*).<sup>9</sup> When we fail to subsume the cognition of an object under a name, we understand it with the help of the words ‘this’ or ‘that’. Therefore, without cognitive discrimination there is no

object. Such discrimination is possible through conceptualization; and conceptualization is penetrated (*anuviddha*) by words.<sup>10</sup> Nyāya and Bhartṛhari differ widely because they take two distinct metaphysical positions. Nyāya metaphysics being realistic and pluralistic accord independence to the phenomenal world independent of mind. Bhartṛhari on the other hand, is an idealist and monist. For him, the phenomenal world is known because the mind is conscious of it, and consciousness is nothing but word-potent.

The second argument that Bhartṛhari advances in support of his thesis comes from the logic of causality, (especially, *satkāryavāda*) prevalent in the ancient Indian tradition. Such a theory of causality takes it for granted that the properties of cause continue in the effects or in the manifestations. Therefore, on the basis of observation of the nature of effects we can infer the cause. For example, curd as the effect of milk retains some of the qualities of milk. On the basis of these qualities one can infer that milk is the cause of the curd, not water. Similarly, on the basis of observation of the word-loaded nature of the phenomenal world we can infer that the cause of the world is the Word. On this basis Bhartṛhari declares:

It is the word, which sees the object, it is the word, which speaks, it is the word, which reveals the object, which was *lying hidden*, and it is on the word that the multiple world rests.<sup>11</sup>

In the above passage the objects are said to be ‘lying hidden’, because, according to him, the objects may exist *ad libitum*, but their true nature is not known unless and until they are subsumed under some names. This is evident from the following argument of Bhartṛhari:

Even that exists is as good as non-existent as long as it does not come within the range of verbal usage. Even totally non-existent things like hare’s horn or something which appears and disappears in the sky like celestial town (*gandharva nagara*) when brought in to mind by word figures like something endowed with primary Reality, in various usages.<sup>12</sup>

This passage clarifies, to a large extent, Bhartṛhari’s position on World-Word relationship. The function of the word is to ‘mean’; but to mean is not to refer to an existent object. It is not a relation that can be stated in ‘Fido’-Fido mould, i.e., here is the word Fido, and there is the dog Fido. In Bhartṛhari’s metaphysical scheme there is no duality between the level of facts and the level of language. These two levels are non-differentiable as objects are only analyzable through language. The world of objects and the world of words cannot be cognized independent of one another. But thereby, Bhartṛhari is not presenting a form of nominalism. The world for him is not a concatenation of names. The world exists but it is never cognizable as such but always, through the ‘cloak’ of words. In other words, he steers clear of referential theory of meaning favoured by the Nyāya school of philosophy. He is not willing to accept the dictum that language pictures the reality. Bhartṛhari, of course has some cogent arguments in support of his thesis. He points out:

It is extremely difficult to establish by reasoning the nature of objects, because their properties differ according to differences in circumstances, place and time.<sup>13</sup>

So what we usually call as the ‘world’ or a ‘fact’ has a metaphorical existence (*upacāra sattā*). If it can ever be known it is only through the attributes superimposed on it. And such attributes are due to our conceptualization made possible through the power of language. This position of Bhartṛhari is nothing unusual. We may note that the famous Western philosopher Kant places a similar view. For him too the world as such is unknown and unknowable. Whatever we know about the experienceable world is arranged and systemized by the categories of thought/understanding. But Bhartṛhari being a linguistic non-dualist would say that even the categories of thought are word-determined. That is the exact reason why he uses the word *vivartate* (appears), i.e., *vivartate arthabhāvena*, in the second line of the verse quoted in the beginning of this paper. The objects are not the real transformation of the Word-principle but apparent transformation.

But explaining the nature of the world in terms of the word may not appear sufficient for us to understand the logical cogency of his non-dualistic philosophy. We may agree with him that without the word there is no thought, no awareness, no cognition and no knowledge of the existence of the phenomenal world as such. But is it not a fact that our thoughts and words could be episodic? They can be many. To answer this pertinent question we have to delve a bit on his conception of language itself. Bhartṛhari makes a clear-cut distinction between the three levels of understanding the concept of *śabda*. *Śabda* could be seen as a principle (*śabda tattva*), it too could be explored in the level of language-in-use which he calls as *loka vyavahāra*, and finally *śabda* could also be an object of analytical and grammatical study (*śāstra vyavahāra*). Thus as a principle *śabda* is one and unique. But when manifested as expressed speech or language it has multiple forms. It is the level of the act. At the level of act, language functions as a communicative tool. It is a vehicle of the communication of meaning. But the meaning that is expressed by particular sentences or words cannot be said to present the meaning as a whole. The particularized expression of a ‘sense’ or a ‘meaning’ through a sentence or a word can at best give us a ‘piece’ or a ‘bit’ of the *linguistic-whole*. When we use language for communication we extract a ‘part’ from this whole on the basis of what we intend to express. This is done by the method of what Bhartṛhari calls as *apoddhāra*, i.e., “the process of constant and progressive extraction, comparison and abstraction.” The meaning is attached to this abstracted bits from the *linguistic-whole* (or *meaning-whole*) by abstracting letters, from words, words from sentences, sentences from discourse, discourse from the larger discourses till we refer to the ultimate point of our *linguistic potency* (that is sometimes also variously called as the Real-word, linguistic whole or the meaning-whole). These words may not properly connote what Bhartṛhari actually designates as *sphoṭa*. It is very difficult to translate the term because no such translation can be adequate enough to focus on the real implication of the word *sphoṭa*. For Bhartṛhari *sphoṭa* is the operative ground of our linguistic communication. This concept is a pivotal point of his analysis of what do we do with the words. We know

that language has multiple nuances and we use it in unlimited number of ways to express our thought. Not only the speaker but the hearer too has the capability to understand and interpret them in similar fashion. This is possible because all language-using beings have the unitary linguistic potency. This is the non-differentiated ground of words, meaning and the object-meant. So each episodic expression is nothing but only a part of the expressible meaning-whole or *sphoṭa*. Similarly, in the level of the object-meant we employ extracted bits of meaning to refer to the ‘bits’ of phenomenal world. The world of objects as such is not knowable. We know only a part of it as presented by a word or a sentence. Whatever we know of objects is limited by concepts—the linguistic constructs (*vikalpa*). The concepts involve the process of selection and elimination. For example, the word *ghaṭa* (pot) as a concept may signify the universal of *ghaṭatva* (potness). But the particular of the pot referred to can be described and meant in innumerable ways. We can refer to pot’s colour by saying ‘the pot is red’, if we want to refer to its shape we can as well say, ‘the pot is round’, and so on. Thus the whole of the object meant can never be grasped by language. The same object can be meant differently with reference to different words that express it differently. In each case we present a limited and selected aspect of it. Thus the ‘whole of the meaning-expressed’ and the ‘whole of the object-meant’ are non-graspable by the ‘bits’ of linguistic units. Both these two dimensions of our act of languageing refer to a point of unity. And Bhartṛhari would say that this unitary whole is nothing but the meaning-whole or what B.K. Matilal translates as the non-differentiated *language-principle*.<sup>14</sup> This is shared by both, the speaker as well as the hearer so that human beings can communicate what they are capable of thinking and speaking meaningfully. This potency is one and non-differentiated but becomes differentiated when it is manifested by particularized expressions of thought and intention.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, so far as Bhartṛhari’s philosophy is concerned, there is no real gap between thought, world and language. They all are penetrated by the Word-principle. As a self-proclaimed philosopher of language (*śabdapramāṇa*) this is the only consistent way to explain the relation between the World and the Word. For a philosopher of language what the word presents is the only method of understanding the Reality. So he explicitly declares: “*Kim asmākam vastugatena vicāreṇa? Arthasosmākam yah śabdenabhidhiyate*” (Of What use to us reflecting on the nature of objects? Object for us is what the word presents.)<sup>16</sup>

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup>William James, “The Sentiment for Rationality” in *The Writings of William James*, (ed.) J.J. McDermott, New York: Philosophical Library, 1963, p. 317.

<sup>2</sup>P.F. Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.14.

<sup>3</sup>Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers*, Vol. II, p. 350.

<sup>4</sup>J.F. Staal, “Sanskrit Philosophy of Language”, in *Current Trends in Linguistics*, Vol., ed. T.A. Sebeok *et al.*, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1969, p. 463.

<sup>5</sup>*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, 4.1.2.

<sup>6</sup>*Ākhyeyarūpānām anākhyeyarūpānām ca śabdānām; Bhartṛhari, Vākyapadīya, Vṛtti under Verse, I. 113.*

<sup>7</sup>*Anākhyeya—śabda-nibandhana balānām pravṛtti. Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Vākyapadīya, Vṛtti on I.124.*

<sup>9</sup>*Tagrupataced utkramed avabodhsya śāsvati, Na prakāśam prakāśeta sa hi pratyavamarsini; Vākyapadīya, I.124.*

<sup>10</sup>*Na so'sti pratyayao loke yah śabdānugamad ruteanuviddham ivam jñanam sarvam śabdena bhāsate. Vākyapadīya, I. 123.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid., Vṛtti under I. 118.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid., Vṛtti under I. 121.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid., I. 32.*

<sup>14</sup>*Bimal K. Matilal, The Word and the World, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 85.*

<sup>15</sup>It is interesting to note that though the famous idealist F.H. Bradley does not share the same metaphysical view as Bhartṛhari they almost speak in the same language when it comes to the explication of meaning (*Principles of Logic*, vol. I, pp. 6-10). According to Bradley “the idea is the meaning.” Such ideas are pure, abstract and universal. The logical conditions of our judgements reveal that they have two aspects—substantive part and the predicative part, i.e., *that* and *what* of a judgement. According to him our judgement is an act by which attach ‘what’ (ideal content) to the ‘that’ (reality) which is beyond our act. So there is no brute fact to which we can jump with our judgements. The substantive part is purely logical in nature. It is neither meaningful nor meaningless. So meaning is purely adjectival in nature; it is the ‘what’ of the proposition that adds meaningfulness to the subject part. But the predicate or the adjectival content is not complete by itself. They are but the parts of the ‘*meaning whole*’ or the ‘ideal content’. The ideal content is purely universal and abstract in nature, and ‘wandering adjective’, which we cut loose from the conceptual net and apply it to contexts that mind has fixed. The ideal content or meaning is one and whole, a complex totality of qualities and relations. It is we the language speakers who introduce division and distinction, and call these products separate ideas with relations between them. So every judgment is the part of the whole, it is not the relation between two particular ideas, i.e., the subject and predicate. In certain respects Bradley’s views appear very close to that of Bhartṛhari’s theory of *śabdadvaitavāda*. Like Bhartṛhari, Bradley believes that the meaning whole cannot be expressed as such. What we express through language are ‘bits’ or ‘pieces’ of the ‘meaning whole’ by the process of selecting and fixing a particular part of it. Our language does not refer to brute facts directly. So the brute realm of facts are not graspable by the abstracted bits of language. However there is a big difference between Bradley’s and Bhartṛhari’s analysis of language as well as metaphysics. Bhartṛhari does not analyse language in terms of that and what. If there is such a distinction then Bhartṛhari would rather say that both belong to the ‘ideal content’ or ‘meaning whole’. Besides, for Bhartṛhari the absolute metaphysical principle is of the nature of language. But Bradley’s absolutism is not an absolutism of language.

<sup>16</sup>Bhartṛhari, *Mahābhāṣya Dīpikā*, Part I. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1967, p. 28.

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