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Philosophy East and West, Volume 71, Number 2, 2021, pp. 287-308 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2021.0020>

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of  
Comparative Philosophy  
Volume 71 · Number 2

University of Hawai'i Press

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# ĀTMAN AS SUBSTANCE IN THE VĀKYAPADĪYA AND BEYOND



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## *Introduction*

The “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” is a chapter of Bhartṛhari’s *Vākyapadīya* (*VP*) that considers substance (*dravya*) to be the referent of all words and the ultimate essence of all phenomena. In the first *kārikā* of this chapter (*VP* 3.2.1) Bhartṛhari lists several synonyms of *dravya*, with *Ātman* being the first among them. It follows from Helārāja’s commentary that each member of this list is the central concept of some philosophical tradition—*Ātman* in particular belongs to the Advaitavādins. Being a traditional commentator, Helārāja could not have cared less for the chronology, but approaching his explanation critically one may wonder what particular form of Advaita he might have in mind and whether Bhartṛhari, who flourished circa the fifth century C.E., could have been familiar with this teaching. Moreover, there is another question that may arise with respect to this *kārikā* and Helārāja’s explanation: what generally is the reason to identify *Ātman* with substance?

In Brahmanic systems of thought, particularly in Advaita, referred to by Helārāja, *Ātman* is generally considered the ultimate essence of an individual sentient being, the basis of all cognitive faculties. On the other hand, in the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” *dravya* is considered the eternal all-pervading substance, the Absolute and the ultimate meaning of a verbal expression. It is a bit surprising that in *VP* 3.2.1 *Ātman*—and not *Brahman*, generally understood as the objective nature of all phenomena—is identified with the ultimate substance. The more so as, in the subsequent *kārikās*, Bhartṛhari tends to identify *dravya* with *Brahman* and never equates it with *Ātman* again. In other words, the identification of *Ātman* with substance appears quite unexpected in Bhartṛhari’s philosophy. Mentioned only once, in *kārikā* *VP* 3.2.1, this view was never developed in the rest of the *VP* and should rather be considered a marginal doctrine enumerated, along with other doctrines, in Bhartṛhari’s encyclopedic work.

The present essay attempts to clarify the meaning of this doctrine and the possible reasons for it to appear. An attempt is also made to trace possible origins of this doctrine in the tradition prior to Bhartṛhari. In what follows, I will dwell, first, on the immediate context of *kārikā* 3.2.1. Second, I will focus attention on the concepts of *dravya* and *Ātman* as they appear in the *VP* and in some earlier works, namely in the *Mahābhāṣya*, in the

Upaniṣads, and in some other works. Finally, I will analyze possible reasons for *dravya* and *Ātman* to be equated, arguing that the clay or gold analogy widely used in different texts can be considered a clue to this equation.

### VP 3.2.1: Its Context and Interpretations

*Ātman* is equated with substance in VP 3.2.1, the initial verse of the “Dravyasamuddeśa” (“Chapter on *dravya*”)—the second chapter of the third book of Bhartṛhari’s *Vākyapadīya* (VP).<sup>1</sup> This verse enumerates the synonyms of substance (*dravya*) in the following manner:

*ātmā vastu svabhāvaś ca śarīraṃ tattvam ity api  
dravyam ity asya paryāyās tac ca nityam iti smṛtam*

The Self (*Ātman*), real thing (*vastu*), own being (*svabhāva*), body (*śarīra*) and primordial element (*tattva*) are the synonyms of substance (*dravya*). It is believed to be permanent/eternal.<sup>2</sup>

Helārāja explains in his commentary that *dravya* is understood here as the ultimate substance and as such is synonymous with the central concepts of other traditions. In particular,

the proponents of Advaita designate the substance with the word ‘*Ātman*’. Because the meaning of words is indeed *Ātman*, [that is,] the substance which appears to be differentiated by limiting factors. (Iyer 1963, p. 106)

Similarly, Helārāja proceeds, the followers of the Buddha claim that *dravya* is the real thing (*vastu*), that is, the own character (*svlakṣaṇa*) capable of producing causal effects (*arthakriyākārin*). The ‘own nature’ (*svabhāva*) or Being (*sattā*) is a synonymous concept of Sattādvaita.<sup>3</sup> *Śarīra* is considered a synonym of the primordial matter (*prakṛti*) of the Sāṃkhya philosophical system, whereas *tattva* refers to the four elements of the Cārvākas. In Helārāja’s view, Bhartṛhari considers all these concepts synonymous with *dravya* in its *pāramārthika* sense, that is, as the absolute Substance. All the ordinary words, like ‘pot’ et cetera, ultimately also refer to this Substance (Iyer 1963, p. 106).

It should be noted that being a synonym (*paryāya*) does not imply a complete identity in meaning (lexical synonymy). In the Sanskrit commentarial tradition, which goes back to the Brāhmaṇas and Yāska’s *Nirukta*, the synonyms were usually understood as glosses introduced in order to explain the meaning of a word in a specific context, being thus contextual rather than lexical synonyms.<sup>4</sup> In the case of VP 3.2.1 this implies that *Ātman*, *vastu*, *svabhāva*, et cetera are similar to substance (*dravya*) in some aspect or in some context, and not that these philosophical concepts are completely identical. But indeed, it is for a certain reason that all the terms

listed in the *kārikā* are considered contextual synonyms, and this reason should be discovered.<sup>5</sup>

Let us leave aside other terms listed in the *kārikā* and focus on the identification of *dravya* with *Ātman*. It seems, indeed, quite puzzling, because *dravya* is usually considered the material unanimated substance, whereas *Ātman* is generally associated with the Self, the core of all cognitive processes and the essence of a living being. This difficulty, however, can be solved if we remember that further in the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” Bhartṛhari identifies substance with *Brahman*, and *Brahman*, in turn, can generally be identified with *Ātman*. Hence, *Ātman* can be considered synonymous with substance. A similar way of reasoning was applied by Madeleine Biardeau, who suggests that in *VP* 3.2.1 Bhartṛhari refers to some early form of Vedānta:

Ce qui l’est déjà beaucoup moins, c’est la série de synonymes donnés au mot *dravya*, où non seulement l’être et l’essence sont mêlés, mais où l’ātman, considéré dans la tradition brahmanique comme le principe éternel qui anime les êtres vivants, se trouve sur un même plan avec *vastu*, la chose subsistante, et *śarīra*, le corps de l’être vivant qui est conçu comme matériel. En revanche, la conscience, dont le Vedānta fait la détermination essentielle de l’ātman-brahman, n’est pas mentionnée. (Biardeau 1964, p. 275)

At this point one may object that equating *Ātman* with *Brahman* does not imply their being completely interchangeable—on the contrary, each concept has its specific semantic field. This observation is especially significant in the case of Bhartṛhari, because in the further verses of the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” he never identifies *Ātman* with the absolute substance and the ultimate referent of words. Surprising as it may seem, the concept of *Ātman* hardly plays any important role in the *VP*. Bhartṛhari usually describes language as an objective entity. In the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” in particular he discusses the problem of reference by focusing on the language and not on the speaker. Unlike most Brahmanic thinkers, Bhartṛhari never considers the knowledge of the true Self (*Ātman*) as the way toward liberation. Nor does he consider individual consciousness identical with *Brahman* (Bronkhorst 1995; Bronkhorst 2009, p. 105).<sup>6</sup> So, the identification of *dravya* with *Ātman* is not supported by the general context of the *VP*, and especially by the immediate context of the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*.” And again we return to the question of what was the reason to identify *Ātman* with substance?

As another possible explanation we may assume that this identification could have been not Bhartṛhari’s own point of view, but a doctrine of some other tradition. This is the opinion of K. A. Subramania Iyer, who criticized Biardeau and claimed that Bhartṛhari and Helārāja simply wanted to stress that *dravya* is “the ultimate substance which remains the same in the

midst of all changes,” and in this respect it is similar to *Ātman* in Advaita, *vastu* in Buddhist philosophy, et cetera (Iyer 1969, pp. 54, 71). Accordingly, Bhartṛhari’s *dravya* is not identical to *Ātman*—these concepts are juxtaposed—just because both of them are central to the systems they belong to.

I agree with Iyer that the introductory *kārikā* of the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” might not express Bhartṛhari’s own view and could rather list important concepts of some other traditions. The final cliché “*iti smṛtaḥ*” implies that this *kārikā* could have been a kind of mnemonic verse transmitted orally in a scholarly community.<sup>7</sup> A similar verse that lists central concepts of different philosophical traditions can be found in Nāgārjuna’s *Acintyastava* (45ab), where the terms *svabhāva*, *prakṛti*, *tattva*, *dravya*, *vastu*, and *sad* are enumerated:

*svabhāvaḥ prakṛtis tattvam dravyaṃ vastu sad ity api. . . .* (Lindtner 1982, p. 154)<sup>8</sup>

Notably, this list of concepts does not include *Ātman*, and—contrary to Bhartṛhari—Nāgārjuna considers these concepts to be not eternal, but stipulated by something else (*paratantra*) and conceptually constructed (*kalpita*). So, evidently Bhartṛhari was not the first to juxtapose central concepts of different traditions in order to estimate their ontological value. Similar lists could have been handed down orally also in some Brahmanic scholastic traditions, and the initial verse of the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” might derive from one of these traditions.

However, the exact origin of *kārikā VP* 3.2.1 and, generally, of the tradition that identified *Ātman* with substance remains problematic. Bhartṛhari belonged to the Mānava-Maitrāyaṇīya school, which might have influenced his philosophy (Bronkhorst 2009). On the other hand, he was a grammarian, and Pāṇinian grammar explicitly presented itself as a universal *śāstra*, not confined to any particular Vedic *śākhā*. This openness to different traditions is quite evident in Bhartṛhari’s tendency to discuss and justify the views of different schools.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the identification of *Ātman* with substance was not the central view of Bhartṛhari’s philosophy. It appears marginal even in the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*,” which in turn reflects only one among many equally possible doctrines collected in the *VP*. Generally, it seems quite plausible that *Ātman* as the substance was mentioned as an alternative view inherited from some previous Brahmanic tradition. This could have been some early form of Vedānta, but the exact origin can hardly be determined.

Besides the historical aspect of the problem, it seems reasonable to focus on the philosophical grounds of the identification of *Ātman* with *dravya*. In order to reconstruct possible affinities between the two concepts, let us discuss *dravya* and *Ātman* as they appear in the *VP* and in the previous traditions that could have been known to Bhartṛhari.

## Dravya in the VP and in the Preceding Tradition

The term *dravya* literally means ‘thing’ or ‘material’. One of the first instances of its use as a philosophical concept can be found in Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya* (*MBh*) (second century B.C.E.), where it denotes either an individual thing (as opposed to the universal form), or a substance, which acquires individual temporary forms (*MBh*, in Kielhorn 1880, pp. 7, 246). Being a grammarian, Patañjali appeals to *dravya* in his discussion on the referent of the word. On some occasions he considers *dravya* an individual empirical object that can be denoted by words: thus, a cow as *dravya* is described as consisting of “a dewlap, tail, hump, hoofs and horns” (*MBh*, in Kielhorn 1880, p. 1). This understanding of *dravya* fits the grammatical context of the *MBh*. Still, on some other occasions Patañjali understands *dravya* as the substance.<sup>10</sup> He justifies this interpretation comparing *dravya* with gold or clay as the essence of a particular object:

“*Dravya* is indeed permanent, and the form (*ākṛti*) is impermanent.”

“How do you know?”

“It is evident from the common practice. Clay shaped into some form becomes a lump. Having mashed the form of a lump they make vessels. Having mashed the form of vessels they make pitchers. Similarly, gold shaped into some form becomes a bar. Having mashed the form of a bar they make golden ornaments (*rucaka*). Having destroyed the form of ornaments they make bracelets. Again turned into a golden bar and again shaped into some form, it becomes ear-rings colored as a charcoal of *khadira*-wood. Form is impermanent and is subject to change, while *dravya* remains the same. With the dissolution of a form it is *dravya* that remains. (*MBh*, in Kielhorn 1880, p. 7)

A similar range of meanings of the term *dravya*—from an individual thing to the basic substrate—can be found in Vaiśeṣika, a system in which the concept of *dravya* plays the central role.<sup>11</sup> Notably, in Vaiśeṣika the Self (*Ātman*) is also considered a special form of *dravya*<sup>12</sup>—on a par with the elemental substances, space, direction, time, and *manas* (*VS* 1.1.4). However, in this pluralistic doctrine *dravya* is just a single *padārtha*, an element in an elaborated system of description. It is by no means the universal substance of the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*.” So, *Ātman* as a kind of substance in Vaiśeṣika is quite different from *Ātman* identified with the universal substance in the *VP*.

Bhartṛhari discusses *dravya* in the two distinct sections of the third *kāṇḍa*, namely in the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” and “*Bhūyodravyasamuddeśa*.”<sup>13</sup> In the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” *dravya* is considered the substance, or the reality (*vastu*) restricted through unreal forms (*VP* 3.2.2). This reality is expressed by words in the same way, as somebody’s house is identified by means of an impermanent feature (*VP* 3.2.3), for example by a crow sitting on the

roof—as Helārāja explains. Or as a word like *rucaka*—the name of a specific golden ornament—which ultimately refers to gold as such (VP 3.2.4):

Like gold or other [material], differentiated by its perishable forms, is denoted solely by such words as '*rucaka*' et cetera.

The latter analogy is, indeed, similar to that introduced by Patañjali. Bhartṛhari, as the author of a commentary on the *MBh*, was evidently aware of the corresponding passage in Patañjali's work. However, in the *Mahābhāṣyadīpikā* (*MBhD*) Bhartṛhari does not dwell on the gold or clay comparison—he simply claims with respect to this passage that *dravya* as the permanent meaning of words (*padārtha*) should be reduced to *Brahman* (*MBhD* 9.2). In any case, in both of his works Bhartṛhari follows Patañjali's view on *dravya* as substance and justifies its being the ultimate referent of all words.

Although the grammarians primarily understand *dravya* as substance, on some occasions it is also relevant to treat *dravya* as an individual object. Individual objects limit the significative power of words—otherwise, words would be capable of signifying every object without discrimination. Just as the capacity of seeing is restricted by a pipe through which one looks, similarly the division of substance into forms prevents a word from denoting any random object (VP 3.2.5). Words are associated with these forms, but since these forms are of the same nature as the substance, all the words ultimately denote the permanent substance (VP 3.2.6). Further, Bhartṛhari claims that there is no essential difference between the real and the unreal, between differentiated forms and undifferentiated Reality. Reality is the signified of all words, and it is not different from them (VP 3.2.14). In the final *kārikās* of the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” Bhartṛhari in his typical manner proceeds by describing the non-dual Reality that only appears to be divided into forms, or into subject and object of cognition. Returning to the gold analogy, he concludes that just as with the dissolution of forms the ear-rings become pure gold, similarly, with the dissolution of all forms the highest primordial substance (*prakṛti*) remains (VP 3.2.15):

Like after the disappearance of form of the ear-ring gold [remains] real, similarly after the disappearance of forms the highest substance is believed [to remain] real.

So, it can be concluded that *dravya* as the eternal substance can be viewed from two perspectives. From an ontological perspective, *dravya* is considered the primordial nature of all phenomena or their ultimate essence. From an epistemological perspective, it is the ultimate object of our ordinary experience, the ultimate reality accessed indirectly through impermanent phenomena. Bhartṛhari's linguistic approach is certainly closer to the second perspective, although he often speaks not in terms of cognitive processes,

but in terms of reference. Words denote different empirical phenomena and through them access the real substance of which all phenomena are made. Although *dravya* is generally understood as the eternal all-pervading substance, from the epistemological perspective individual phenomena are not completely eliminated. They are the objects of ordinary experience, and in the context of cognitive or linguistic activity both universal and individual aspects of *dravya* appear interrelated. Thus, *dravya* can be characterized not only as the unique real essence, which is manifested through particular empirical objects, but also as an immanent aspect of a particular object, which gives access to the unique real nature. The ambivalent character of *dravya* is grasped in the gold or clay analogy, which underlines the all-pervasiveness of the substance and its identity with all individual forms and phenomena. A possible clue to the identification of *dravya* with *Ātman* may be connected with this analogy.

### *Ātman in the VP*

The concept of *Ātman* is pivotal in the philosophy of Vedānta. This school of thought has been extremely influential since the end of the first millennium C.E. As a result, Vedāntic concepts of *Ātman* are often retrospectively considered as central to Brahmanic philosophy in general. The doctrines of preceding centuries are often interpreted in terms of more recent schools of Vedāntic philosophy. No doubt Helārāja followed this trend when he identified the *Ātman* in *kārikā VP* 3.2.1 with the *Ātman* of Advaita. But from a historical standpoint this identification remains problematic. First, chronologically Bhartṛhari precedes the Advaita of Śaṅkara or the non-dual doctrines of Kashmiri Śaivism (which Helārāja as a Kashmiri could have had in mind), and it remains uncertain which (pre)schools of Vedānta already existed at Bhartṛhari's time and could have been known to him. Second, the general Vedāntic (Upaniṣadic) concept of *Ātman* as the true Self the knowledge of which is the way to liberation can hardly be found in the *VP*. In this respect Bhartṛhari appears closer to Buddhist anātmavādins.

Addressing the first question: due to his Brahmanic background, Bhartṛhari could have belonged to an early Vedāntic school. The history of the early Vedānta is, certainly, a controversial issue. It remains uncertain which schools of Vedānta existed in Bhartṛhari's time and whether these can be considered doctrinal schools, rather than fluent traditions. Textual evidences are scarce, and doctrines of Vedānta are rarely mentioned in the works of other schools. It seems likely that Bhartṛhari was acquainted with the oldest Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavadgīta* and the *Brahmasūtras*, the texts acknowledged as foundational by all Vedāntic schools. In *VP* 3.3.72 he mentions some trayantavedins—"the experts in the three Vedas (*trayī* [*vidyā*]) and the Upaniṣads (*anta*)"—probably the followers of some early version of Vedānta (Houben 1995, pp. 293–294). This is the only time a



teaching similar to Vedānta is mentioned in the *kārikās*. Generally, Bhartṛhari's monistic teaching is, indeed, close to Vedānta, and to Advaita in particular, and in later doxographies his doctrine is designated *śabdādvaita*.

With regard to the second question, it should be noted that Bhartṛhari's proximity to Vedānta is invalid in the case of *Ātman*. Quite unpredictably for a Brahmanist thinker, Bhartṛhari hardly pays any attention to this concept. The word '*Ātman*' is, indeed, present in the *kārikās*, but mainly with the general meaning of 'essence' (e.g., in *VP* 3.2.16). In *VP* 1.144 Bhartṛhari occasionally mentions the realization of the highest Self (*Paramātman*) through the purification of the word, and the *Vṛtti* elaborates the supporting doctrine of *śabdapūrvayoga*.<sup>14</sup> But this is the unique case, not confirmed by the general context of the *VP*.<sup>15</sup>

It can generally be assumed that Bhartṛhari was close to some early Vedāntic traditions and shared some of the ideas that later were formulated in the works of Vedānta schools, and of Advaita in particular. This, however, is not true with respect to the concept *Ātman*, which was certainly well known to Bhartṛhari, but hardly plays any important role in his philosophy. So, what was the reason for him to identify *dravya* with *Ātman*? As already mentioned, this identification could have been inherited from some previous tradition.<sup>16</sup> Although its immediate origin can hardly be traced, it is worth trying to find possible grounds of this identification in the earlier texts available to us.

### *Gold and Clay Comparisons in the Early Upaniṣads*

Discussing *dravya* as the universal all-pervading substance, both Bhartṛhari and Patañjali compare it with gold and clay as permanent materials, which acquire different impermanent forms. So, in our search for the possible grounds for the identification of *dravya* with *Ātman*, it seems worth exploring whether this comparison has also been used with respect to *Ātman* in some early Vedāntic traditions that could have been known by Bhartṛhari.

The oldest depiction of Vedāntic doctrines can be found in the early prose Upaniṣads. Especially the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (*BAU*) and *Chāndogya* (*ChU*), with their manifold discussions about *Ātman*, deserve attention as a probable source for the identification of *Ātman* with substance. *Ātman* is, indeed, the pivotal concept in these Upaniṣads—although it differs significantly from the *Ātman* of subsequent Vedānta schools. In the *BAU* and *ChU* the doctrine of *Ātman* has not yet reached the exceptional position and is discussed on a par with some other ritualistic and philosophical doctrines. And what is more significant, the meaning of the word '*Ātman*' in these Upaniṣads is ambivalent and sometimes quite different from the well-known meaning of this term in the subsequent schools of Vedānta.

The general meaning of the Sanskrit '*Ātman*' is that of the reflective pronoun 'self'. In the early Upaniṣads it is often used in the two closely

related meanings of ‘body’ and ‘self’ (Olivelle 1998, p. 557). The traditional, although linguistically doubtful, derivation of ‘*Ātman*’ from the root *an* (‘to breathe’) correlates with its popular meanings of ‘breath’, ‘breathing body’, and ‘breathing essence’ (BAU 3.4.1, 4.2.4) or ‘sentient being’ constituted of cognition (*vijñānamaya*) (BAU 4.3.7). On different occasions either individual or universal aspects of *Ātman* are emphasized. The view that *Ātman* is the imperishable that constitutes the essence of a human being reaches its pinnacle in the identification of *Ātman* with *Brahman* (BAU 2.5). However, on many occasions this universal *Ātman* is not opposed to the human body or other material objects—on the contrary, it appears somehow interrelated with them. In *ChU* 5.11–18 *Ātman* is described as *Ātman Vaiśvanara* (“common to all men”)—the fire in the body identified with a ritual fire. Particularly in *ChU* 5.18.2—in a typical Upaniṣadic manner—different worldly phenomena are identified with distinct aspects of this *Ātman*:

Now, of this self here, the one common to all men—the brightly shining is the head; the dazzling is the eye; what follows diverse paths is the breath; the ample is the trunk; wealth is the bladder; the earth is the feet; the sacrificial enclosure is the stomach; the sacred grass is the body hair; the householder’s fire is the heart; the southern fire is the mind; and the offertorial fire is the mouth.<sup>17</sup>

In this passage the self (*Ātman*) is not the abstract Self or an individual self, but rather a general principle manifested in and interrelated with different natural phenomena. In a similar way it is described in the sixth chapter of the *ChU*. Of particular importance is *ChU* 6.1 where the relationship of *Ātman* and the phenomenal world is explained by means of clay and gold comparisons, similar to those in the *MBh* and *VP*. The passage in *ChU* 6.1 is the beginning of the famous dialogue between the sage Uddālaka Āruṇi and his arrogant son Śvetaketu.<sup>18</sup> Uddālaka asks his son whether he knows

. . . that rule of substitution by which one hears what has not been heard of before, thinks of what has not been thought of before, and perceives what has not been perceived before?

Śvetaketu is unable to answer and Uddālaka explains,

“It is like this, son. By means of just one lump of clay one would perceive everything made of clay—the transformation is a verbal handle, a name—while the reality is just this: ‘It’s clay.’

“It is like this, son. By means of just one copper trinket one would perceive everything made of copper—the transformation is a verbal handle, a name—while the reality is just this: ‘It’s copper.’

“It is like this, son. By means of just one nail-cutter one would perceive everything made of iron—the transformation is a verbal handle, a name—while the reality is just this: ‘It’s iron.’

“That, son, is how this rule of substitution works.” (*ChU* 6.1.4–6)

In the subsequent parts of the dialogue (*ChU* 6.8–16) Uddālaka stresses repeatedly that this finest essence of the whole world is the Self (*Ātman*). The parallel between the passages in *ChU*, *MBh*, and *VP* is quite evident. All of them contain comparisons, which illustrate a similar idea: just as the ultimate nature of different artifacts is the material they are made of (clay, gold, iron, etc.), similarly there is the ultimate principle in all phenomenal objects or in every part of the Universe. In the *ChU* this principle is designated as *Ātman*, in the *MBh* and *VP* as *dravya*. Uddālaka claims that this principle must be recognized beyond all empirical objects—and recognized as one’s own Self (*Ātman*). Patañjali and Bhartṛhari, on the other hand, describe this principle as the basis of all empirical objects or referents of verbal expressions, and identify it with *Brahman*.

In *ChU* 6.13 there is yet another comparison similar to those discussed above, but in this case *Ātman* is compared with salt dissolved in water. Uddālaka makes his son dissolve a chunk of salt in a container of water and after that asks him to bring the chunk of salt back. Indeed, it is impossible, because the salt has dissolved completely.

“Now, take a sip from this corner,” said the father. “How does it taste?”

“Salty.”

“Take a sip from the center. How does it taste?”

“Salty.”

“Take a sip from that corner. How does it taste?”

“Salty.”

“Throw it out and come back later.” He did as he was told and found that the salt was always there. The father told him: “You, of course, did not see it there, son; yet it was always right there.

“The finest essence here—that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*Ātman*). And that’s how you are, Śvetaketu.”

A dissolved chunk of salt cannot be seen, yet its taste is present in every sip of water. Similarly, the Self is the finest essence not to be perceived directly, but still it is omnipresent. Again, *Ātman* here is not opposed to the phenomenal world, but is considered the ubiquitous essence to be discovered in all worldly phenomena as well as in one’s own Self. The possibility to discover the universal *Ātman* in the individual Self is expressed in the famous expression ‘*tat tvam asi*’. According to Brereton’s convincing analysis and contrary to the popular identification of ‘*tad*’ with *Brahman*, this formula should be rendered as ‘*in that way are you*’, with the pronoun ‘*tad*’ having an adverbial function (Brereton 1986, p. 109).<sup>19</sup> In the passages terminated with this formula Uddālaka considers the relation of the universal *Ātman* with one’s individual self to be the same as its relation with other phenomena. *Ātman* in this passage is the universal

essence of everything, which can be discovered equally within oneself and in other phenomena.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the concept of *Ātman* in the passages discussed above differs significantly from that in classical Advaita. Notably, there is no hint at the unreality of the phenomenal world and the unique reality of the true Self—a question so important for the proponents of Advaita. Being universal and all-pervasive, *Ātman* is to be discovered not only within oneself (although this is probably the most immediate way), but also as the essence of other phenomena. This is the reason why *Ātman* can be compared with gold, iron, and other materials (*dravya*) that constitute the essence of different objects.

### *Ātman as Dravya in the Teachings of Early Vedānta*

The view of *Ātman* as *dravya* in the *ChU* might represent some early form of Vedānta that subsequently failed to become a mainstream teaching. Bhartṛhari's equation of *Ātman* with *dravya* might be an allusion to a doctrine of this kind. Additional support to this hypothesis could be provided if we were able to find some evidence from other Vedāntic texts where *Ātman* is viewed in a similar way.

Direct references to the clay and gold comparisons from *ChU* 6.1 can be found in the *Brahmasūtras* (*BS*) and in the *Kārikās* of Gauḍapāda (*GK*). Although completed considerably late, these works present a number of doctrines of an earlier period.<sup>21</sup> Both the *BS* and *GK* discuss and reinterpret Upaniṣadic passages aiming to reconcile them with more recent doctrines of Vedānta, although the elliptic style of *sūtras* and *kārikās* often makes it difficult to understand them unambiguously. Particularly, *BS* 2.1.14 is believed to be connected with the passage in *ChU* 6.1:

*tadananyatvam ārambhaṇaśabdādibhyaḥ*

The non-difference between them [is evident] from the words 'ārambhaṇa' et cetera.

According to the majority of the commentators, the non-difference in this *sūtra* is that between the cause and the effect, and the word 'ārambhaṇa' refers to the Upaniṣadic sentence (*ChU* 6.1):

*vācārambhaṇaṃ vikāro nāmadheyaṃ mṛttikety eva satyam*

The transformation is a verbal handle, a name—while the reality is just this: 'It is clay'.

Affinity between clay or gold and their temporary modifications can indeed be described in terms of the cause and effect relation. However, Uddālaka never focused on this aspect of the problem. Besides, he did not completely deny the difference between the substance and its impermanent forms. He

simply stressed that the real essence can be discovered in all phenomena. It can be suggested that the composers of *BS* reinterpreted Uddālaka's doctrine because they could not reconcile the view on *Ātman* as the universal all-pervading substance with their current philosophical agenda. In a similar way, this view might have appeared marginal to subsequent commentators of the *BS*.<sup>22</sup>

The *GK* also present a reinterpretation of Upaniṣadic comparison (*GK* 3.15):

*mṛllohavispḥuliṅgādyaiḥ sṛṣṭir yā coditānyathā  
upāyaḥ so' vatārāya nāsti bhedaḥ kathaṃcana*

Creation was explained in different ways by means of [analogies with] clay, iron, sparkles, et cetera. This is [just] a means of explanation. There is no difference at all.

The clay and iron comparison in this verse is usually considered a direct allusion to *ChU* 6.1 (Karmakar 1953, p. 95). This comparison is introduced after the difference between *Ātman* and *jīva* has been denied in the preceding *kārikā*. Indeed, in *ChU* 6 Uddālaka never distinguished between *Ātman* and *jīva*. Probably, Uddālaka's view on *Ātman* appeared incompatible with Advaitic teaching of the *GK* and was reinterpreted. Gauḍapāda evidently did not understand the clay analogy as a clear argument in favor of monism. He found it necessary to underline that this comparison was just a means of explanation, whereas in reality there was no difference between the essences and their modifications referred to in the *kārikā*. So, it is evident that the Upaniṣadic doctrine of *Ātman* as the all-pervading substance was considered problematic by the composers of the *BS* and *GK*, who tried to reinterpret Uddālaka's comparison in terms of non-dual monism.

However, there is another valuable source on the early history of Vedānta, namely the Buddhist works that discuss and criticize Vedāntic doctrines.<sup>23</sup> In the context of our study, Bhavya's *Madhyamakahṛdayakārikās* (*MH*), composed in the sixth century C.E., seem to be worthy of note. This work for the first time mentions 'vedāntavāda' as a specific name of the school (*MH* 8.1). In *kārikās* *MH* 8.1–17 the doctrine of this Vedāntavāda is expounded, whereas the following part of the chapter presents a critical investigation of this doctrine from the standpoint of Buddhist philosophy. In particular, *MH* 8.12 reads as follows:

*yathā ghaṭādibhede 'pi mṛdbhedo nāsti kaścana  
\*tathaiva dehabhede 'pi nātmabhedo' sti kaścana*<sup>24</sup>

Despite the difference [in the form of] pots et cetera, the clay is non-different. Similarly, despite the difference between bodies, *Ātman* is non-different.

Bhavya's auto-commentary on the *MH* called the *Tarkajvālā* (extant in Tibetan) explains the *kārikā* in the following way:

Although the products, like a pot, a cup, et cetera are different, there is no difference in their material cause. So also, there is no difference whatever in the Soul, although the bodies of deities et cetera may differ from each other. (trans. Gokhale 1958, p. 175)

Obviously, we see here the same clay comparison that is introduced in order to elucidate the nature of *Ātman*—quite similar to the way *Ātman* is explained in Uddālaka's teaching. Further in his critique of Vedānta, Bhavya returns to this problem and in *MH* 8.59–60 rejects explicitly the view that *Ātman* is identical to *dravya*. These data are indeed scarce, but they allow us to conclude that some proponents of early Vedānta, with whom Bhavya was familiar, considered *Ātman* to be similar to substance. And this was probably the same view that was mentioned in *VP* 3.2.1.

Another evidence of the variety of views on *Ātman* in early Brahmanic thought can be found in the “Alagaddūpamasutta” of the *Majjhimanikāya*. This *sutta* gives a list of six false views on the Self, among them the following:

Whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, obtained, searched, reflected by the mind: “This is mine.” It is believed in accordance with this view, “This is the world, this is the Self. . . .” (*MN*, in Trenkner 1888, p. 135)

*Ātman* here is identified with the world, not with substance. But this pantheistic view is somewhat close to the doctrine of *Ātman* as *dravya* discussed earlier: the world (*loka*) may refer here to substance as the ultimate essence of the material world. Notably, Pratap Chandra considers this view “a naive misrepresentation of the true Upaniṣadic position—in fact, . . . indistinguishable from materialism,” and evidence that the Buddha was not properly acquainted with the teaching of the Upaniṣads (Chandra 1971, p. 321). However, if we remember that the Upaniṣads do not present a single coherent teaching on the Self, we can suggest that this *sutta* refutes some variation of the view on *Ātman* as the universal essence of all phenomena. And this, in turn, can be considered additional evidence that such a doctrine was comparatively well known at the time as one of the Brahmanic views on the Self.

Some non-canonical views on *Ātman* can also be found in Jaina works, such as the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*. This work mentions a theory of the *Ātmaśaṣṭhavāda*, according to which the soul is listed as the sixth substance, and is considered eternal—on a par with the first five elements/substances that constitute the material world (Jacobi 1895, p. 238). Jayatilleke discussed Pāli parallels to this

view, which he considered as “one of the theories, which held that the world and the soul were eternal” (Jayatilleke 1963, p. 265). Indeed, the theory of *Ātmaśaṣṭhavāda* does not identify *Ātman* with the world and does not consider *Ātman* to be the only substance. This view is closer to the concept of *Ātman* in Vaiśeṣika than to the view of *Ātman* as the Substance discussed in this article. This demonstrates, however, the variety of the views on the substantiality of *Ātman*, which can be discovered in early schools of Indian philosophy and further traced in VP 3.2.1.

### *Ātman and Dravya: Concluding Remarks*

So far, we have observed the striking similarity between the ways in which *dravya* is described in the *Mbh* and *VP*, and *Ātman* in the *ChU* (and in the expositions of early Vedānta teaching in some non-Brahmanic works). *Ātman* and *dravya* are both compared with the permanent material or substance, which constitutes the true nature of individual phenomena and can be discovered in them. Both *Ātman* and *dravya* are considered universal and ubiquitous, and at the same time intrinsically related to individual objects. However, the concepts of *Ātman* and *dravya* in these works are introduced in different contexts and cannot be considered completely identical. The difference between them is quite predictable, because Uddālaka’s teaching was soteriologically oriented, whereas the grammarians introduced the concept of *dravya* in order to solve the problem of reference—their approach to *dravya* was semantically stipulated. As a result, Uddālaka’s *Ātman* was the universal principle to be discovered within oneself. The grammarians, on the other hand, looked for the universal primarily within external objects—the objects of words.

The two doctrines also differ notably in the way they answer the question of whether this ultimate principle can be designated linguistically. Uddālaka Āruṇi claims that each transformation is just a name and contrasts it to the real essence, the latter implied to be beyond the realm of language. Patañjali and Bhartṛhari, on the other hand, justify the view on language as the ontological principle and consider *dravya* the ultimate meaning of all words. Still, this ultimate meaning is not to be expressed by a single word: it comprises the meanings of all words at once and is non-different from them (cf. VP 3.2.16).

The similarity in the exposition of *Ātman* in the *ChU* and of *dravya* in the *MBh* and *VP* implies a link between these concepts. Direct historical links between the doctrines in the *ChU* and *MBh* cannot be excluded. However, it is more reasonable to speak in terms of a typological similarity between both concepts, and the ways in which they are explicated. The use of comparisons (*udāharaṇas*) as illustrative models was a typical feature in pre-modern Indian intellectual discourse (cf. Katsura and Steinkellner 2004). A clay or gold analogy can be considered a common means to illustrate the idea of the universal and ubiquitous substrate of all phenomena. The use of

this analogy with respect to *Ātman* in a similar way as it was used with respect to *dravya* indicates that *Ātman* on this occasion is understood as something similar to a material substance—rather than to the conscious principle of the schools of classical Vedānta.

The discrepancy between Helārāja's commentary and the interpretation of VP 3.2.1 formulated in the light of the gold and clay comparison evokes the general question of the reliability of traditional commentaries. Traditional commentators are well known for their indifference to the problem of historicity. It would be ridiculous, however, to blame them for this. As Andrew Nicholson noted with respect to discrepancies discovered in Sanskrit doxographies,

The frustration many modern scholars have had in dealing with the Indian doxographies comes from a misunderstanding of their purpose. They were not empirical accounts of a state of affairs, upon which we can base reliable and comprehensive accounts of the Indian philosophical schools. Rather, they were an idealised vision of the way the doctrines should be. . . . (Nicholson 2012, p. 113)

Similar observations can be made with respect to traditional commentaries, which never aimed to present a historically reliable account of the past philosophies. Commentaries explicate the ideas of the commented text, harmonizing them with the current philosophical context. Accordingly, the commentators could not have cared less about the question of anachronism and did not hesitate to use more recent views in order to explain the doctrines of the past. Their explanations are, indeed, valuable and should be taken into account if one aims to study traditional modes of interpretation. However, they are of little help for a reconstruction of the history of doctrines and philosophical schools. As demonstrated above, a historical reconstruction provides us with the clue to VP 3.2.1. There are no reasons to attribute the concept of *Ātman* in this verse to Advaita. Whatever the origin of the *kārikā* could be, *Ātman* is identified with *dravya* here, because both *Ātman* and *dravya* refer to the universal all-pervasive essence to be discovered in all phenomena. A similar understanding of *Ātman* can be discovered in Uddālaka's teaching in the *ChU*, as well as in some Buddhist texts. This interpretation of VP 3.2.1 contributes to our understanding of the early history of Vedānta. It throws light on the doctrines that for a long time were commonly identified as Vedāntic ones, but later on became marginal and were superseded by the mainstream schools of Vedānta.

Notes

Abbreviations are used in the text and Notes as follows:

*BAU* *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. See [Olivelle 1998](#).

*BS* *Brahmasūtras*. See [Dvivedin 1903](#).



- ChU *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. See [Olivelle 1998](#).
- GK *Gauḍapādakārikā*. See [Karmakar 1953](#).
- MBh *Mahābhāṣya*. See [Kielhorn 1880](#).
- MBhD *Mahābhāṣyadīpikā*. See [Bronkhorst 1987](#).
- MH *Madhyamakahr̥dayakārikās*. See [Lindtner 2001](#).
- MN *Majjhima-Nikāya*. See [Trenkner 1888](#).
- VP *Vākyapadīya*. See [Iyer 1963](#).
- VS *Vaiśeṣikasūtra*. See [Jambuvijayi 1961](#).

- 1 – The first book of the *VP* (the “Brahmakāṇḍa”) deals with ontological and functional aspects of the word (*śabda*); the second book (the “Vākyakāṇḍa”) discusses the sentence/utterance (*vākya*). The third book (the “Padakāṇḍa”) is divided into chapters (*samuddeśas*), each (with the exception of the last one) dedicated to a single philosophical or grammatical category. The “Dravyasamuddeśa” is closely associated with the preceding “Jāṭisamuddeśa,” as these chapters present two competing answers on the nature of the referent of the word—whether it is the universal (*jāti*) or the substance (*dravya*).
- 2 – All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. The *VP* and Helārāja’a’s commentaries are translated based on Iyer’s edition ([Iyer 1963](#)).
- 3 – Helārāja describes *svabhāva* as differentiated from limiting factors (*upādhis*) in a similar way, as he did in the case of *Ātman*. The name of Sattādvaita usually refers to the system of Maṇḍanamiśra, as distinguished from the Ātmādvaita or Cīdadvaita of Gauḍapāda and Śāṅkara ([Rao 1998](#), p. 104), although it is hardly believable that Bhartṛhari could have had this system in mind. According to Charles Li, Helārāja denoted with the terms of Ātmādvaita and Sattādvaita not the schools of Śāṅkara and Maṇḍanamiśra, but simply the two different doctrines of the Absolute explicated in the “Dravyasamuddeśa” and the “Jāṭisamuddeśa,” respectively ([Li 2018](#), p. 31). In any case, one may wonder whether Bhartṛhari in *VP* 3.2.1 actually used *svabhāva* as a synonym of *sattā*—especially because he explicitly used the latter term in the “Jāṭisamuddeśa” (*VP* 3.1.33).
- 4 – For the use of synonyms in scholastic commentaries see [Tubb and Boose 2007](#), pp. 19–22. For glossing in the Brāhmaṇas see [Lubin 2019](#). For contextual synonymy as the basis of the *nirvacana* method see [Kahrs 1998](#).

- 5 – It can also be suggested that these terms were grouped together merely on account of acting as a final member of a compound with the general meaning ‘consisting of’, ‘being of the nature of’. But if we believe that this *kārikā* deals solely with grammatical issues, a natural question will arise as to why, after the list of synonyms, *dravya* is proclaimed to be permanent? Moreover, this interpretation is not supported by the general context of the “*Dravyasamuddeśa*” as a consistent philosophical chapter that aims to justify the view on *dravya* as the verbal meaning (*padārtha*). So, obviously *VP* 3.2.1 should be interpreted in a philosophical context.
- 6 – However, in the verses attributed to Bharṭṛhari’s lost *Śabda(Ṣaḍ)dhātusamīkṣā*, *Ātman* is considered the highest Self deluded by ignorance (*avidyā*) (Ratié 2018, pp. 732–734). The attribution of these verses to Bharṭṛhari is not commonly accepted—that is, on the basis of the obvious conflict between them and the *kārikās* of the *VP* (see Bronkhorst 1994, p. 39; Ratié 2018, pp. 715, 734). It seems to me that the general context of the *VP* evidently leaves no room for the concept of *Ātman*, so even if the verses in question are correctly attributed to Bharṭṛhari’s *Śabda(Ṣaḍ)dhātusamīkṣā*, this must not affect our interpretation of the *VP*. It is highly unlikely that Bharṭṛhari as a Brahmanist thinker was completely unaware of *Ātman*, as it appeared in the Upaniṣads and in some early forms of Vedānta. So, the absence of *Ātman* in the *VP* might have been the result of his deliberate decision to avoid this concept in this work.
- 7 – There are a few instances of this cliché or its variations in the *VP* (*VP* 1.96, 3.1.32, 3.8.22). It is also very often used in other metrical texts of oral origin, such as the *Mānavadharmasāstra* and the *Mahābhārata*, where it marks the information (such as genealogical lists, etymological interpretations, or definitions) imparted from the wise people of the past. I thank Dr. Vassilkov for his comments on this point.
- 8 – This verse can be considered the source of *VP* 3.2.1 (Lindtner 1993, pp. 199).
- 9 – Halbfass proposed to designate this approach with the term of perspectivism (Halbfass 1988, pp. 268–269, 414). On Bharṭṛhari’s perspectivism see Houben 1997 and Desnitskaya 2018. This philosophical strategy can also be compared with Manu’s textual technique, which Olivelle designates as ‘anthologizing’: “In anthologizing, the author opts to place material drawn from different sources side by side without much editorial intervention or any serious attempt at reconciling differences among these textual extracts” (Olivelle 2005, p. 33).
- 10 – On the meaning of *dravya* in the *MBh* see Scharf 1996, pp. 23–28, 36–37.

- 11 – On the double meaning of *dravya* in Vaiśeṣika see [Halbfass 1979](#), p. 539, and [Halbfass 1992](#), p. 89.
- 12 – A similar view on *Ātman* was subsequently developed in Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Pratyabhijñā.
- 13 – This short section of the *VP* considers *dravya* in a functional perspective.
- 14 – For different opinions on *śabdapūrvayoga* see [Bronkhorst 1995](#) and [Ferrante 2014](#).
- 15 – On another occasion (*VP* 1.131) Bhartṛhari claims that all cognitive processes (*pratyaya*) are penetrated with the linguistic principle, which, in turn, can be considered identical with *Brahman*. The view that the individual consciousness is of the same nature as the Absolute generally agrees with Bhartṛhari's monistic attitude. However, one can hardly identify *pratyaya* in this *kārikā* with *Ātman*, and it would be far-fetched to interpret this as evidence of Bhartṛhari's adherence to the *Ātmavāda*.
- 16 – From the concluding verses of the second *kāṇḍa* of the *VP* we learn that in the period between Patañjali and Bhartṛhari there were a number of teachers who discussed and developed different grammatical theories. Bhartṛhari does not mention any title of their works, so it can be concluded that information was transmitted mainly in an oral way. It can be suggested that similarly some philosophical ideas of early Vedānta schools passed in an oral form through the generations.
- 17 – All Upaniṣadic passages are cited in Olivelle's translation ([Olivelle 1998](#)).
- 18 – On the character of Śvetaketu see [Olivelle 1999](#).
- 19 – See "that's how you are" in Olivelle's translation ([Olivelle 1998](#), p. 253).
- 20 – The comparison of *Ātman* with salt can also be found in the Maitreyī dialogue in *BAU* 2.4 and 4.5 (cf. [Brereton 2006](#)). For a better understanding of this comparison we should remember Slaje's observation that the salt analogies in the *BAU* and *ChU* are based on a popular view that salt is of the same nature as water—its transformation in an evaporated state ([Slaje 2001](#)).
- 21 – The extant form of the *BS* was probably compiled between 400 and 450 C.E. ([Nakamura 1990](#), p. 436). The *GK* are usually dated around the sixth century C.E.
- 22 – For a detailed analysis of important commentaries on *BS* 2.1.14 see [Ghate 1981](#), p. 73. A somewhat similar view on *Brahman* as the

material cause of the world can be found in *BS* 1.4.23, 2.1.18–20 (Nicholson 2010, p. 27).

- 23 – A comprehensive account of the relevant passages is provided by Nakamura (Nakamura 1955).
- 24 – Numeration of the verses is given according to Lindtner 2001. The Sanskrit reading of the second part of the verse is reconstructed by Gokhale based on the extant Tibetan translation (Gokhale 1958, p. 175).

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