

“Rethinking Dualisms: An Interreligious Approach”
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Part 1: Introduction

Dualism. If any problem lies at the heart of process and relational theologies, it is dualism – an irreducible twoness that often subordinates one to the other, a dichotomy between God and world, mind and matter, self and other, men and women which has funded countless oppressions. Critiques from process theology remedy the problem from the top down, going right to the supposed source of oppressive dichotomies: God. *Creatio ex nihilo* yields to a vision of God’s being with creation; divinity is made horizontal, divined as the connections in and between beings.

The process-relational vision of divine relationship to the world has important implications for the foundations of interreligious dialogue. If one accepts the process point of view, one can no longer view divine revelation as the exclusive province of one religion or ethnic group. This paper will explore how we might arrive at (or perhaps return to) a relational theology *interreligiously*. Encounter with unfamiliar systems of thought can shed new light on one’s home tradition.¹ I have found Samkhya philosophy to be particularly stimulating on the subject of dualism. Samkhya is the properly “dualistic” Indian school of thought which is the philosophical basis for many yogic practices and texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. This study demonstrates that dualism is an inherently comparative or relational mode of thought, which leads me to rethink the oppositional readings and anti-dualistic rhetoric in contemporary critiques of our Western theological foundations.

¹ For one example of the constructive possibilities that may emerge from such an encounter, see (Cobb 1982).

Lack of clarity about the term dualism has caused much confusion and slippage in accounts that oppose it; so I would like to clarify at the outset how I am using it, especially in terms of current process conversations. We have Manichean dualism of good and evil, Cartesian juxtaposition of mind and body, and various other oppositional patterns of thought in the modern period including subject/object, West/East, culture/nature, man/woman. Relational theologians are aware of all of these, but their cosmological critique focuses on another sense: the question of ontological difference between God and the world (or, in non-theistic systems, between spirit and matter). The conflation of the latter relationship – spirit/matter – with any of the former – mind/body, etc. – sets up a rhetorical connection between dualist *ontology* and problematic notions of salvation and the human person. But spirit and matter can be related in any number of ways. One can be hierarchically subordinated to the other, and this may or may not translate into domination of nature and the body. But they also may be radically permeable to each other. I propose to investigate one such vision of the spirit/matter relationship from Samkhya philosophy, in order to suggest in response a non-oppositional rereading of Western dualisms.

Part 2: Samkhya

In exploring the relational meaning of dualism in Indian Samkhya philosophy, I follow Gerald Larson's authoritative interpretation of Ishvarakrishna's *Samkhya Karikas*. This school flourished in its classical period from the fourth to seventh centuries of the Common Era, although its roots lie deep in Vedic sources and its influence stretches into the terms and concepts of other schools of Indian philosophy.²

² (Larson 1979) 1.

Samkhya enumerates a “cosmology” of sorts, articulated from the perspective of the observant spirit.³ There are two basic principles *purusha*, spirit, and *prakrti*, matter or nature. Their distinction is simple: *Purusha*, otherwise known as the knower (*jna*), is conscious, while *prakrti* is not. *Prakrti* exists in two states: the manifest (*vyakta*) state, which is this world, and the unmanifest primordial state (*vyakta, mulaprakrti*), which is “perhaps best expressed,” Larson writes, “as an undifferentiated plenitude of being which implicitly contains the possibilities of all thought and substance.”⁴

Purusha and *prakrti* remain separate, yet they interact in a fascinating manner. When *purusha*, always the inactive observer, comes into proximity to unmanifest *prakrti*, the equilibrium of the elements (*gunas*) is disturbed. This puts into motion the process of evolution, and various principles emerge from *prakrti*. Figure 1 below (p. 10) charts the evolution of the principles that occurs when *purusha* and *prakrti* come together. Unmanifest *prakrti* becomes manifest. *Buddhi* (awareness in general) is the first to emerge, followed by *ahamkara* (self-awareness). What we would call personal consciousness emerges with *ahamkara* (ego); and from it come mind, all the organs of sense and action, and the subtle and gross elements. All of these evolutes, including mind, are modifications of *prakrti*. Thus, the dualism in Samkhya is not mind-body but spirit-matter.

Why does cosmic evolution happen at all? The *Samkhya Karikas* say it is *purushartha*, for the sake of *purusha*. *Purusha* enjoys and contemplates the created world, and the process of evolution occurs for the sake of its liberation. In the dialectical

³ Ibid. 193. Larson believes this makes Samkhya terminology more “psychological” than cosmological, but see 195-96 for ways in which Samkhya is rooted in ancient cosmology.

⁴ Ibid. 13.

interplay of matter and spirit each appears as what it is not.⁵ *Prakrti* seems to be conscious; and *purusha* looks as if it is active. Through this dialectic, the world and its attendant suffering arise; but without it, *purusha* cannot experience the salvific discrimination (*vijnana*) of this relationship. One comes to know the difference between *purusha* – “one’s deepest nature” – and *prakrti*.⁶ Salvation, in other words, is knowledge of the eternal process of evolution. One realizes the nature of difference between the two. Spirit can never realize itself outside of matter; thus matter is always coming into being in the presence of spirit. Spirit and matter, though irreducible, are essentially related; they stand over and against each other as two, but they continually interact to produce the world and achieve liberation. *Samkhya Karika XXI* says that *prakrti* and *purusha* cooperate like a blind man and a lame man – one providing the vision and the other the motion toward their destination.

This is dualism, but dualism of an unfamiliar stripe. It looks like God-world dualism, but with some important differences. First, *purusha* is not God – for unlike a god it is inactive, lacking will, personality, and what we might call initial aim – but it does hold the place of an eternal spirit that stands as witness over and against the created world. Second, with regard to its practical consequences, it is not so easy to saddle Samkhya with the negative connotations customary in our discussions of dualism. For example – where is contemptible mind/body dualism? Mind (*manas*) is matter, just as is the body! Matter is neither evil nor inferior to spirit.⁷ It is, rather, *purusha*’s eternal

⁵ Ibid. 188-91.

⁶ This is the realization that “one’s deepest nature or selfhood is not determined by the process of emergence i.e. *prakrti* and its modifications – but rather is that which determines the process of emergence” (ibid. 14).

⁷ The role of *prakrti* is instrumental; the *Samkhya Karikas* explain that she bows out when her part is finished: “As a dancer, having exhibited herself to the spectator desists from the dance, so does nature desist having manifested herself to soul. ... Nothing ... is more gentle than nature; once aware of having

counterpart. Larson points out this peculiarity, writing, “The Samkhya dualism is not a dualism of mind and body, or a dualism of thought and extension. All such dualisms are included or comprehended on the side of the unconscious world.”⁸ The distinctions between different kinds of dualism are, therefore, important when we shift to the comparative context. In Samkhya, there is an irreducible difference between spirit and matter, which does *not* entail the kind of link Western thinkers tend to draw between God/world dualism and all other types.

Purusha only becomes liberated through involvement in the body – as individuals with mind and organs of sense and action. Yet with our *practical* worries about mind-body dualism, we are still left wondering: What role does the body play in liberation? Although Samkhya philosophy does not take up this question directly, the Yoga school does, explaining its praxis of liberation in Samkhya terminology.⁹ It is debatable whether these practices subordinate the body. Some scholars believe that the accomplished yogin achieves radical severance of spirit from body, so that he or she no longer participates in physical or social activity.¹⁰ Others, like Ian Whicher, places a high value upon the role of the body in the spirit’s return to itself, claiming that the goal (*kaivalya* or *cittavritti nirodha*) is not the cessation of mental activity or disengagement from the world, but a reorientation of how one *sees* that frees the individual *for* involvement in the world. “A *jivanmukta* – one who is liberated while yet embodied,” he

been seen, she does not again expose herself to the gaze of soul” (*SK* 59, 61). We could take this on a cosmic level, meaning that creation ceases to occur when at the liberation of *purusha*. But given that Samkhya is always dual – *purusha* and *prakrti* are always interacting – I think we should take this as an epistemological statement. For the *purusha* that sees its distinction from *prakrti*, it is no longer confused about the difference between the two.

⁸ (Larson) 217.

⁹ Ian Whicher warns that Yoga is not to be reified into dualism as happens (he believes) when Samkhya metaphysics are superimposed upon it, preferring to see the praxis as inhabiting a non-dualistic or pantheistic universe. See (Whicher 1998) 283-84.

¹⁰ See, for example, (Varenne 1976).

explains, “can use the body and mind out of benevolence and compassion for the spiritual benefit of others.”¹¹

Contemporary uses of Samkhya terminology illustrate the range of constructive positions that may issue from its dualism. For example, eco-feminist Vandana Shiva has drawn attention to the concept of *prakṛti* as feminine, in conjunction with women’s traditional wisdom about living in harmony with the natural world, in order to voice opposition to environmentally destructive practices of profit-driven modern technology.¹² My point is that the dynamic relationship of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* can lend itself to either sort of practice – those that devalue the body, or those that elevate it as essential to liberation. Samkhya dualism’s flexibility illustrates the lack of inherent connection between spirit-matter dualism and the denigration of the body, women, and nature – which are different sorts of dualism mutually implicated in Western conversations.

Part 3: Dualism Revisited

I have drawn attention to two points that I think bear attention in this encounter: the essential relatedness of the Two in Samkhya dualism and the lack of inherent link to the “bad” dualisms process thinkers have tended to draw from God-world difference. Now, returning to process-relational conversations regarding dualism, how might we alter the terms of that conversation?

Dualism has been a bad word for process and relational theologies, and there has been much effort in formulating a cosmology that is not dualistic. Many who oppose the strict difference between God and the world in what is known as classical theism label their model of transcendence-in-immanence as “panentheism,” the all *in* God. Some

¹¹ (Whicher 1998) 167. For a range of positions on the *jivanmukta* in Indian traditions, see (Fort and Mumme 1996).

¹² (Shiva 1988).

thinkers like Grace Jantzen challenge the resistance to recognize divinity in the world by appropriating the term “pantheism.” Most process theologians do not wish to reduce divinity to what is, nor do they advocate what in Indian philosophies is called “non-dualism.” For them, the divine encompasses God’s primordial and consequent natures as the erotic lure toward the horizon of ever new perfections. Eminently related, co-creating, persuading rather than controlling, divinity is the powerful flow of *eros* in and through all that is. We even might compare this *eros* to the mysterious connection between *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* that excites the process of creation in Samkhya.

But stepping back from these discussions, Samkhya can help us interrogate common tropes about the Western “dualism” we all criticize. Before the early modern period, did Western philosophers really posit such a stark division between mind and body, spirit and matter, men and women, God and the world? Bearing in mind the possibility of a dynamic concept of dualism in Indian philosophy, can Western scholars shake free of Enlightenment antinomies and read our foundations anew? How else are twos related in our texts? Can we again think “dualism” – the non-reduction of each side of these pairs to each other – without positing their inherent opposition and hierarchical valuation?

The constraints of a conference paper allow only a suggestion for returning to these sources, although I would wager that many pre-modern theologians, mystics, and even Plato and Plotinus themselves exhibit more dynamism between spirit (God) and nature than they are usually credited by modern thinkers. In contrast to the “blame Plato” mentality in some process thinkers, Whitehead noted that the dynamism in the concepts of *eros* and the soul preclude reading Plato’s metaphysic as entirely static and inherently

separative.¹³ In the Neo-Platonic concept of emanation from the One, even the body participates to some extent in its Being. A cosmology of participation betrays the disproportionate hatred of the body espoused in many texts, as well as their overblown valuation of the mind. Even though human beings tend to confuse God or *purusha* with intelligence, the ultimate reality, to quote Pseudo-Dionysius, “is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding.”¹⁴ Tensions like these in our own texts open a space for contemporary theologians to think ontological difference without capitulating to hierarchy – even without fully rejecting the philosophical foundations. What’s more, we may come to appreciate pre-modern notions of hierarchy that are not oppressive. A robust notion of participation in its medieval or process variations mitigates strongly against either-or thinking.

I have been suggesting that the way in which we think dualism is often unnecessarily subject to oppositional, hierarchical patterns. Samkhya has shown us one way in which dualism – the difference of spirit and matter – need not imply the subordination of one to the other but can denote a dynamic, necessary relationship between two non-reducible partners. Even so, given the range of connotations dualism now has for us, would it not be better to abandon the term altogether? “Isms” provide useful handles for complicated ideas, but they can also obscure more than they elucidate. What if, when we returned to our own texts, we simply paid careful attention to the notions of otherness and relation we found there, and to the ways in which cosmology may be in tension with the social relations the authors envision?

¹³ “The Psyche is, of course, the Soul; the Eros is the urge towards the realization of ideal perfection. . . . If we omit the psyche and the Eros, we should obtain a static world. The ‘life and motion’, which are essential in Plato’s later thought, are derived from the operation of these two factors” (Whitehead 1933) 275.

¹⁴ *The Mystical Theology*, chapter five (Dionysius, Luibhéid, and Rorem 1987) 141.

It may not be possible to undo the history of effects that an oppositional reading of dualism has had on culture. The denigration of women, body, emotion, and earth for their overvalued counterparts is well-ingrained into the Western psyche. No romanticization of the East (another unhelpful dualism) can solve this. But by way of return from the other, interreligious dialogue can enable theologians to rethink the nature of divine and human transcendence, and the terminology we use for it. The comparative process enables us – like *purusha* – to observe an other. We begin to see things differently as a conceptual universe crystallizes before us. The process may help us let go of accustomed structures of thought, making us more aware of characterization of traditional dualisms, and leading to creative re-readings of the tradition.

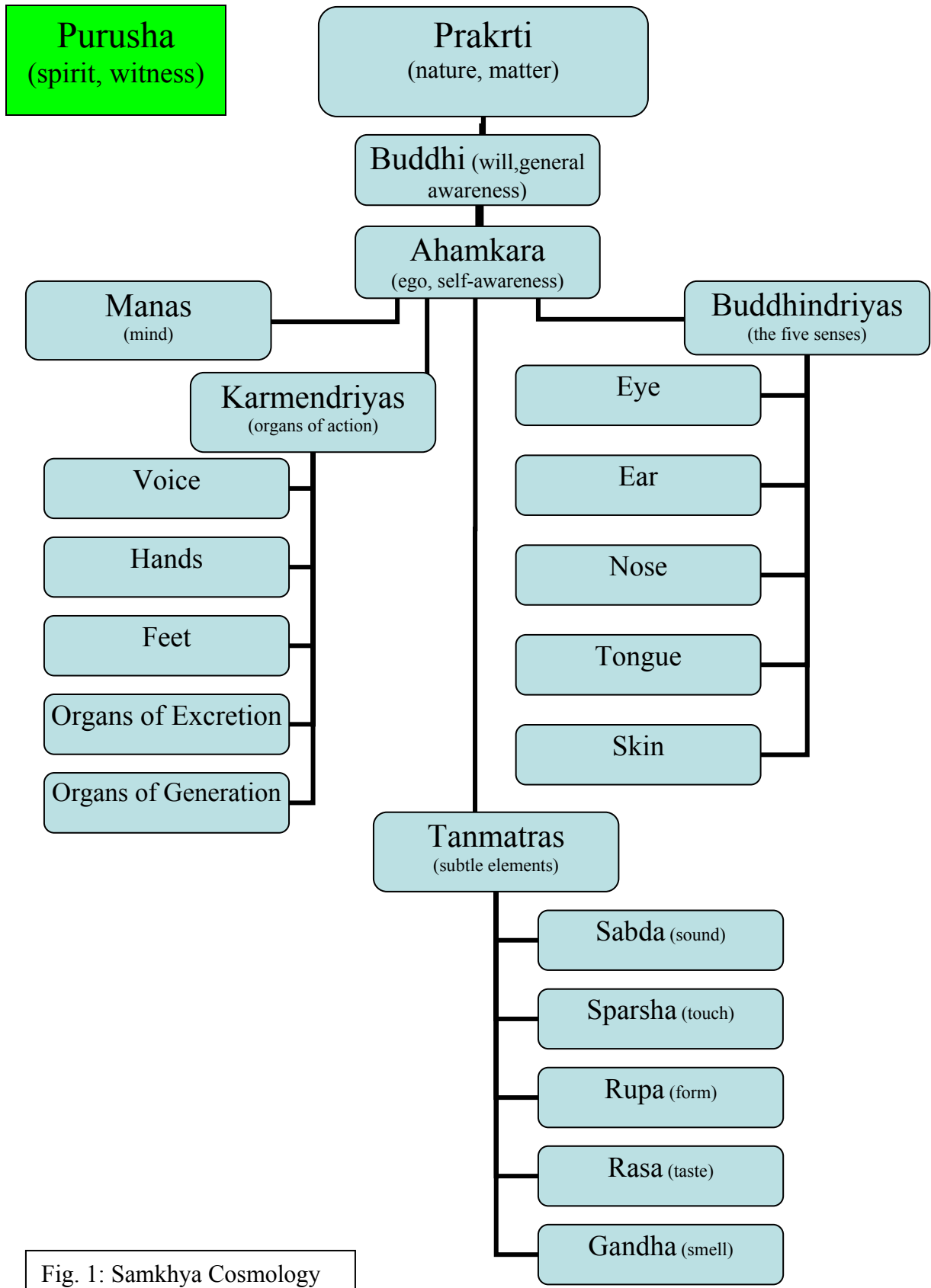


Fig. 1: Samkhya Cosmology

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