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**The sense of ego-maker in classical Sāṁkhya and Yoga.  
Reconsideration of *ahaṁkāra*  
with reference to the mind-body problem<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

For the contemporary scholars who see problem-solving and not just describing it as central to philosophy, and who believe that counterpoising of Western and Eastern intellectual traditions can yield useful results, comparative perspective, or so called ‘fusion philosophy’<sup>2</sup>, may seem very inspiring, especially if it goes beyond mere bringing out similarities and differences. Such a comparative methodology is now undertaken by more and more indologists who can both read Sanskrit sources and are well trained in Western philosophies. Some researchers interested in Indian and Buddhist thought try to interrogate the advances in the ongoing cognitive studies with the help of concepts and arguments developed in the Indian philosophies famous for their special concern with self-knowledge. In particular, the renewed focus on embodied cognition in Western philosophy encourages the present author to draw upon two oldest classical darśanas and to discuss mind-body relationship in a wider comparative context. Here, I am going to concentrate on the Sanskrit category of *ahaṁkāra*, or ego-maker, which sense challenges the dualist conception of subjectivity.

While elucidating the sense of ego-maker in classical Sāṁkhya and Yoga philosophy I bear in mind several meanings of the word ‘sense’, or different levels of its understanding, namely: the semantic, ontological and epistemic as well as axiological sense. Thus, my aim is, firstly, to specify the semantic sense of the term ‘*ahaṁkāra*’, that is to explain its contents or denotation. Secondly, when focusing on the ontological context I will try to define the nature and reason, or purpose

<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was presented at the international seminar on “Ego, Embodiment and the Sensory-Motor System: A Workshop Towards a Creative Interface between Indian Philosophy, Cognitive Science & Phenomenology” held in Bangalore, National Institute of Advanced Studies, September 3-5, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> This term was first used by Mark Siderits in his *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy. Empty Persons*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, p. xi.

(*arthavattava*), of *ahamkāra*. Thirdly, I shall also discuss the ego-maker in epistemic terms by displaying its function of the particular means or determinant of all experience. And finally, when concentrating on the axiological level I am going to consider the significance or value of *ahamkāra* in the context of self-understanding and spiritual development.

### 1. In the grip of dualism

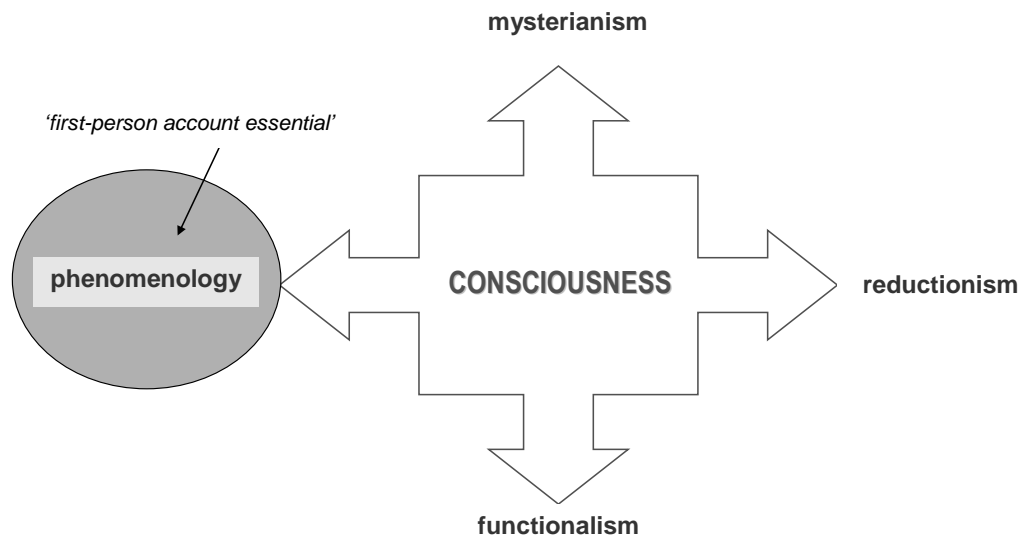
The complexity of the structure of a human discussed by ancient Greek and Medieval Christian philosophers mostly in terms of the soul–body union, has become thematized since Descartes as a relationship between non-spatial and non-physical consciousness and, on the other hand, the spatially extended and material body. As in subsequent ages the conception of matter has been developed within the physical sciences, while the conception of the psyche, thinking, consciousness, or the mind<sup>3</sup> has been essentially influenced by slowly progressing experimental psychology; the problem gained some new important aspects and became commonly called the mind–body problem. Due to this historical background and the variety of methods applied to the ‘body’ and ‘mind part’ of the issue, nowadays, we do not face one but rather a bundle of problems dealing with the relationship between the two<sup>4</sup>. To make the matter worse, the more intensely the problem is investigated the number of synonymous categories or their seeming equivalents used in debate increases. Consequently, this process also multiplies the possible misconceptions and controversies among researchers. Both philosophers and psychologists interested in solving the problem since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century have been trying to sharpen the categories and to find the arguments for a chosen ontological position.

A commonly shared belief, which is well-grounded in several religious doctrines though it involves some serious theoretical obstacles, is the conviction about the inner dichotomy of a human being, either in the form of substance or property dualism. What is more, even the so called ‘monist’ positions in the body-mind debate apply the traditional vocabulary that contrasts and separates ‘the mental’ and ‘the physical’ and, therefore, they do not overcome a dichotomizing perspective. As we can see in the recent maps of consciousness studies, some implications of this traditional post-Cartesian categorization may still be recognized.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Mind’ is understood here quite broadly as derived from the Cartesian *mens* which embraces thinking, doubting, perceiving, sensing, imagining, desiring, feeling and the like. Cf. *Meditations* 2.

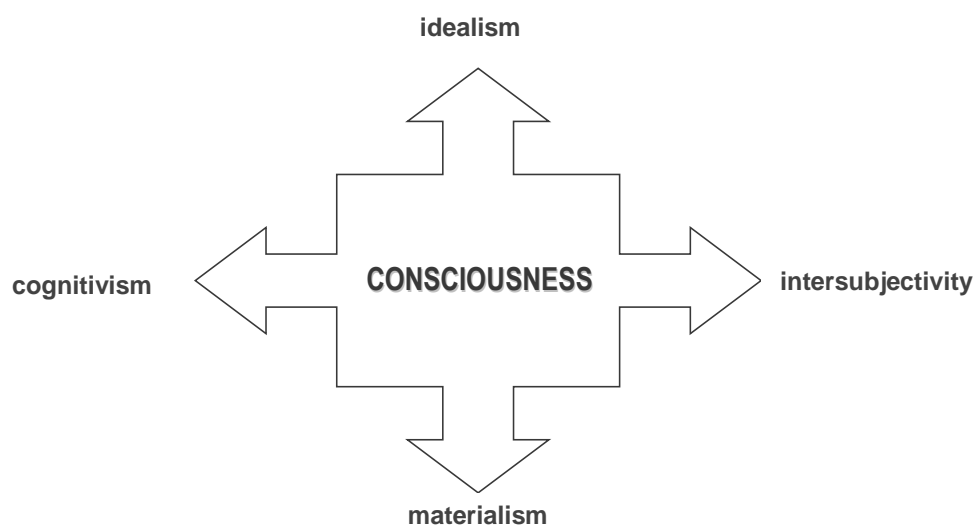
<sup>4</sup> For instance John R. Searle (2004: 11-22) apart from the traditional mind-body problem points out to as many as eleven other highly debatable issues, like the problem of other minds, solipsism, the problem of free will, the self and personal identity, the question of animal minds, the problem of sleep, intentionality, mental causation and epiphenomenalism, the unconscious.

Fig 1. Approaches to consciousness according to Francisco Varela (1996)



In this chart of Francisco Varela (Varela, 1996), we can see two axes, one ranging between phenomenology and reductionism, the other between functionalism and mysterianism. Varela seems to oppose the popular research strategies of dealing with consciousness from the objective or 'third person account' to the phenomenological methodology which accepts the subjective or 'first person point of view'.

Fig. 2. Dimensions of the Science of Consciousness recognized by Charles Whitehead (2004)



The author of the second chart considers a distinction between the ‘first’ and ‘third person account’ to be a result of over-simplification and misconception; as he says: ‘an account by definition is third person!’. Charles Whitehead points out two dimensions not recognized by Varela and calls all four positions on Varela’s chart ‘individualistic’. He suggests we should distinguish two major axes; one between materialism, which includes both reductionism and functionalism, and idealism, whose perspective is mostly neglected by modern researchers; another axis should be drawn between cognitivism (individualistic) and all other intersubjective methodologies, like social anthropology, self-awareness research, transpersonal and developmental psychology etc. Looking from the perspective of the main stream of the contemporary consciousness studies predominated by the monist, especially materialist paradigm<sup>5</sup>, one might doubt if we can obtain any hints that would help us to understand our mind better thanks to a reading of the ancient Sanskrit texts since they do not offer any precise quantitative data. The cognitive and neuroscientists as well as AI (artificial intelligence) specialists or phenomenologists engaged in the debate on the science of consciousness have been advancing their research without knowing any classical Indian theories and categorizations of subjectivity. So, why bother with these ideas which do not correspond historically or conceptually with the most influential modern doctrines of the body and mind relationship? Well, if the up-to-date science of consciousness is a meta-cultural project, as it is supposed to be, its value should lie in its ability to emancipate us from the negative or burdensome aspects of our own cultural heritage, including the collective deceptions or misconceptions that created the ‘problem of consciousnesses’ or ‘body-mind dichotomy’. The alternate formulation of the mind–body problem offered by Sāṃkhya and Yoga elucidates the issue from a different angle, and may in turn highlight the presuppositions underlying the western analysis, and reveal that some of the assumptions constitute the arbitrary choices about the way we conceptualize the phenomena, rather than inherent divisions supported by the phenomena themselves<sup>6</sup>. We should also remember that the fundamental principles and categories of many Indian philosophical doctrines, and classical Yoga in particular, were not just dogmatically postulated, but rather discovered and accepted after a proper analytical study of experience, including meditative or mystical insights collected by many generations of the anonymous practitioners working in the ‘laboratory of one’s own mind’. It does not mean, however, that such an experience-based philosophical theory may be free of speculations and paradoxes. Certainly it is not.

<sup>5</sup> As Charles Whitehead reports, at the sixth biennial Tucson Conference: *Towards a Science of Consciousness* in 2004, the materialists, or “the brain-wiring/information processing faction”, represented far more than 80% of all presenters. Cf. Ch. Whitehead (2004).

<sup>6</sup> For some interesting comparative comments on the Sāṃkhya-Yoga version of dualism see P. Schweizer (1993). The author claims that these Indian darśanas provide a more felicitous dividing line between substances than does the Cartesian parsing of mind and matter.

## 2. What is the mind–body problem, after all?

One of the most promising contemporary perspectives in which we may reconsider the body–mind relationship seems to be a combination of two originally rival methodologies—the cognitive science, based on the objective empirical data, and the phenomenology of human embodiment, based on self-reflection. A new formulation, worthy of mentioning, of the so-called body–mind problem, based on this methodology was suggested by Hanna and Thompson (2003). Instead of one they point to three problems that should be distinguished here: the Mind–Body Problem, the Body Problem and the Mind–Body–Body Problem. The first problem is how to account for the existence and character of the mental—specifically consciousness—in a physical world. The second problem is that no one has a true theory of nature and the physical world, therefore, as Chomsky rightly notices: “In absence of a coherent notion of ‘body’, the traditional mind–body problem has no conceptual status”. And the third, and threefold, problem is how to understand the relation between: (i) one’s subjective consciousness; (ii) one’s living and lived body (*Leib*), that is, one’s animate body with its “inner life” and “point of view”; and (iii) one’s body (*Körper*) considered as an objective thing of nature, something investigated from the theoretical and experimental perspective of natural science. Hanna and Thompson claim that even if there is no Traditional Mind–Body Problem because of the Body Problem, there is still a Mind–Body–Body Problem that can be generated outside of Cartesian metaphysics (Hanna and Thompson, 2003, p. 40). They argue for an animalist solution of the problem, according to which subjective conscious minds and objective material bodies are nothing but dual aspects of living and lived bodies or animals. In other words, animals—including all human animals like us—are neither essentially mental nor essentially physical, but instead essentially *both* mental and physical. As Hanna and Thompson persuade, this animalist solution is strongly supported by empirical data from cognitive ethology and first-person data from the phenomenology of human embodiment.

To introduce the concept of ego-maker (*ahaṁkāra*), used in the treatises and commentaries of two allied schools of Hindu philosophy, Sāṁkhya and Yoga, to the glossary of the contemporary body–mind debate, we should first try to present their position in the categories applied above. However, neither the Sāṁkhyas nor Yogins seem to be primarily interested in solving any of the three problems distinguished by Hanna and Thompson. Thus, what seems inevitable is to pose another philosophical question which would capture the central interests of both classical Indian systems. The key problem is how to understand the relationship between the empirical consciousness or mind, which is substantially homogenous with a physical body and undergoes the same natural conditioning, and the pure transcendental consciousness, or the core subjectivity, the Self, or Spirit (*puruṣa*). Or, in other words, the problem is how to restrain a delusive identity of the Self with the embodied ego, being a product of nature or *prākṛti*. So, the problem that Sāṁkhya and Yoga are interested to undertake is, in fact, the Embodied Ego–Self Problem, or the Mind–Consciousness Problem but not the Mind–Body Problem. Hence, the conceptual context in which an ego-maker should be discussed

differs essentially from the categorization in which a dilemma of duality of a human being has been expounded in Western thought.

### 3. Varieties of subjectivity in Sāṃkhya and Yoga

To define more precisely a unique function and sense of the embodied ego, its relationship to the pure consciousness, and to demonstrate its conceptual complexity, I shall set together the Sanskrit terms occurring in *Yoga-Sūtras* (c. 3<sup>rd</sup> AD) and *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* (c. 5<sup>th</sup> AD) in six groups.

The first aspect of subjectivity recognized in both texts is derived from the ability of **perception**; to be a subject means to be able to perceive. A reference to the sense of vision seems obvious due to the predominance of seeing in the process of sensual perception. Therefore, ‘seeing’ serves naturally as a metaphor of perception as such. Among the terms grouped under this label, we have both some personal nouns (*darśin*, *draṣṭṛ*) and impersonal or abstract forms (*drś*, *draṣṭṛtva*), which implies the essence of subjectivity which is not necessarily identified with a particular individual perceiver. A closer contextual survey of the terms occurring in YS I.3-4 and YS II.20 proves that Patañjali makes a fundamental distinction between two aspects of the seer (*dras.tr.*)—**the absolute subject** and **the empirical subject**, or in other words, between the absolute Self and the phenomenal self, or between consciousness and mind. Paraphrasing the words of *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (III. 17-19), the absolute Self is the one who reflects the qualities of all the senses and yet is devoid of all the senses, the one who knows whatever is to be known but of him there is none who knows. Whereas the mind needs senses to perceive and, unlike the Self, may be known as an object through self-reflection. The pure consciousness is simple, with no structure, and unaffected by any change. There is no content in it, neither is it intentional nor referring to anything. Whereas, the empirical subject being complex, intentional and ever changing, is the principle of unity running through all types of objective knowledge, the actions and feelings of the individual. In Sāṃkhya and Yoga philosophy, contrary to Kant’s where three subjects in one individual are distinguished—one for knowing, one for acting and one for feeling—there is just one empirical subject which seems to know objects (real or unreal), performs actions (moral or immoral), and feels pleasures or pain (Bhattacharyya, 1988, p. 179-180). Nevertheless, apart from accepting one empirical subject both Indian systems postulate the existence of the transcendental subject which is the ultimate ‘knower’ but not an ‘agent’ or ‘doer’<sup>7</sup>. The paradox of the Self consists in its being inactive by definition and simultaneously being the power, *śakti*, of the empirical subject, or mind (*drśśakti*, YS II.26). While the empirical subject undergoes constant change, which makes it seem active and creative, the absolute seer actually makes the ego’s experience possible, though it does not change itself; staying outside all change it merely makes the transformation possible by witnessing it. Without a witness, there is no change, no stability, no

<sup>7</sup> S. Bhattacharyya emphasizes a fundamental difference between ‘the knower’ and ‘the doer’ obscured by the grammatical form. The phrases ‘my knowledge’, ‘my action’, ‘my feeling’ may mislead one to think that the ego enters into every mental state in the same way, yet the empirical subject is not an agent in knowing, as it is in performing a voluntary action. Cf. Bhattacharyya (1988), p. 183.

difference between anything. It is worth noting, that this fundamental distinction should be conceived as made both on the ontological and epistemological level.

The second aspect of subjectivity is **cognition** represented by a group of terms referring to the different cognitive capacities and organs of the seer. Again we can see ambiguity within this aspect because some terms refer to the absolute subject, or pure subjective power of consciousness (*citi*, *cetana*), while others refer to various organs of the empirical subject, like *buddhi*, *manas*, *citta* and *antaḥkaraṇa*. What is important is that although all mental states and acts are conscious states and acts, they are not consciousness. This is due to invalid cognition, or ignorance and non-discrimination between two realms of separate nature—*prakṛti* and *puruṣa*—which makes the pure consciousness, the Self, falsely identify itself with the principle of presentation (*buddhi*), though the latter can only manifest the cognitive, conative and affective qualities without becoming consciousness itself. In this context, Sāṃkhya dualism manifests itself as the separation between consciousness and mental representation or the representational content of mind. In other words, this dichotomy consists in a metaphysical heterogeneity between consciousness, often compared to a light, and the mental processes which need to be illuminated by the former.

The third aspect of subjectivity is the ability to **personalize oneself**. However, what one should understand by ‘personalizing’ has nothing in common with the popular meaning of ‘personality’ given in modern psychology. In Sāṃkhya and Yoga the terminology ‘*puruṣa*’ does not refer to ‘man’ or ‘person’ but should be understood as a neither a psychological nor physical entity, the principle of consciousness, or ‘selfhood’ being the most subtle, non-empirical but transcendental aspect of subjectivity. Nevertheless, due to the correlation with *prakṛti* (*saṃyoga*) *puruṣa* becomes involved in personalization indirectly. This is exactly a contribution of *ahaṃkāra* to make *puruṣa* ‘personal’, to identify one’s mind with consciousness and make it seem the enjoyer (*bhokta*), doer (*karta*) or sufferer.

In this set of notions ‘*puruṣa-viśeṣa*’, identified with *Īśvara*, seems especially puzzling. Because its description given in YS does not correspond with the characteristics of the absolute seer, and because its meaning is much wider than the usually mentioned ‘special’ and ‘superior self’<sup>8</sup>, *Īśvara* should be perceived as an ideal model of the empirical seer. Being unconditioned by one’s deeds (*karman*) and free of ignorance (*avidyā*), *Īśvara* is present in the form of inward consciousness (*citi*), or the inner guru accessible through the meditative effort. Such an image of the ideal perceptor makes ‘*Īśvara*’ a counterpart of the concept of ‘*jīvanmukta*’ rather than ‘God’. Otherwise, the

<sup>8</sup> The term ‘*viśeṣa*’ covers three main meanings: (1) ‘to distinguish’ – a. ‘distinguishing’ (distinction); b. ‘difference’ or ‘dissimilarity’; c. ‘distinguished’ (distinct), and also ‘sign’ or ‘mark’; (2) ‘to differentiate’ – a. ‘diversity’; b. ‘discrimination’ and ‘peculiarity’ or ‘individuality’; c. ‘diverse’, that which has been modified; and also ‘modification’ and ‘secondary-ness’; (3) ‘to single out’ – a. ‘standing out’; b. ‘singularity’ or ‘superiority’ and ‘magnificence’; c. ‘special’ or ‘raised above’. So, *Īśvara* defined in Yoga as *puruṣa-viśeṣa* may be understood as: (1) ‘distinguished *puruṣa*’, that is *puruṣa* distinguished by consciousness in the course of discriminative discernment (*vivekakyāti*); or as (2) ‘differentiated seer’, that is the absolute seer differentiated from the empirical seer and the seen, the object; or as (3) ‘*puruṣa*’s sign’ marked on *linga*; or (4) as ‘peculiarity’ or ‘secondary-ness of the Self’, that is the reflection of the Self in *sattvic buddhi*.

soteriological ideal of *jīvanmukta*, or liberated while living, is not addressed in YS while it is accepted in SK. The ability to personalize oneself, or to aim towards the ideal self, is necessary for the spiritual development because it makes one aspire and approach the true self-knowledge and the steadfastness in the seer's own form (*svarūpa-pratiṣṭha*, YS IV.34). On the other hand, however, one should bear in mind that such a 'personalization' by identification of the ego with the true Self (*puruṣa*), or rather its perfect mental image, is nothing but a usurpation until the ultimate self-knowledge is achieved.

The fourth aspect of subjectivity involves a very basic function of the empirical subject, namely being referred to the object as one's own, grasped or even mastered by oneself. The sense of 'ownership' or 'myselfness' (*mamakāra*), irremovable from any experience is regarded as a constitutive factor of the ego-maker. The empirical consciousness is always known in introspection as the personal consciousness which is 'my' consciousness. As long as the empirical subject functions, everything it knows, feels and acts is known to itself as 'mine'—'my' knowledge, 'my' pleasure or pain, 'my' deed. 'Myselfness' naturally represents a feeling of individuality and uniqueness, and also separation, or feeling different, other, limited by personal boundaries. Moreover, the sense of ownership makes the ego feel responsible for its actions and lets it gain the sense of control and efficacy. In the context of the spiritual growth, it may exert either an entangling or liberating impact on the empirical 'I'. On the one hand, it causes suffering (*duḥkha*) because some actions inflate the ego—those which are considered a success by the doer, while others depress it—those which make it frustrated. But on the other hand, this is responsibility, presuming the sense of ownership, which enables any self-development and progress in self-understanding.

In a group of terms identified with the fifth aspect of subjectivity, there is the ego-maker (*ahaṁkāra*) together with three other concepts: *abhimāna*, *asmitā* and *ātman*. All of them imply **self-awareness** but have a different status in both *darśanas*. The ego-maker, which is the centre or axis of all states and acts of the subject, requires a detail consideration so I shall leave it aside now and discuss it wider below. *Abhimāna*, or self-conceit, which could be technically defined as an unduly extension (*abhi-*) of the I-notion to entities foreign to it, always accompanies *ahaṁkāra* as its function (SK 24). The self-conceit, similarly to the sense of ownership, involves some ambiguity. It brings forth a common feeling of pride which may be of two basic types. Pride in the first meaning is respect, regard, honour, consideration of oneself and others; this kind of pride gives strength, power and can lead to victory over all obstacles (*kleśas*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) if one manages to withdraw a destructive aspect of pride, which is egotism, arrogance and selfishness. Without pride in the first meaning, without respect towards oneself and deep trust in one's power and potential no progress would be ever possible. Thus, the positive pride coming from *abhimāna* is a necessary prerequisite of the auto-soteriological project, so common in Indian spirituality. *Asmitā*, or 'I-am-ness', often equated with *ahaṁkāra*, is typical of Yoga rather than *Sāṁkhya*. It is discussed by Patañjali in the context of ignorance (*avidyā*) as the first of five *kleśas* (YS II.3, 6) and in the context of spiritual transformation to mark a stage of advanced *samādhi* (YS I.17; III.47). Vyāsa in his *bhāṣya* to YS III.47 says that



asmitā is a mark (lakṣaṇa) of ahaṁkāra which indicates its phenomenal rather than ontological status. Thus, ‘I-am-ness’ is the way ahaṁkāra manifests itself or reflects itself in the process of perception, cognition or doing. As we can read in *Yuktidīpikā*, the anonymous commentary to SK, ‘when there is the I-am feeling (asmi) specific apprehensions occur, like I am in sound, I am in touch, I am in form, I am in taste, I am in smell’<sup>9</sup>. Or more precisely ‘I am involved in the sensation of sound, I am involved in the sensation of touch’ etc. So, in contrast to the ego-maker or pure I-sense, ahaṁkāra, asmitā refers to the intentional involvement of ego in present sensation, cognition, emotion or activity. In other words, ahaṁkāra is egocentric, or first-person perspective while asmitā is self-attachment and an overrating of one’s egocentric point of view.

And ‘ātman’, the third of the terms implying self-awareness, occurs in YS mainly as a reflexive pronoun—‘myself’, and refers to the act of self-reflection and the self-transparency of the empirical subject. So, unlike the Upaniṣads and Vedānta, ‘ātman’ is used by Patañjali as an epistemic rather than ontological term.

Lastly, the sixth aspect of subjectivity which is the ability to gain self-knowledge by **dis-identifying** oneself with all that is not the true Self. This aspect rises from the epistemic position of both schools of Hindu philosophy. Though in Sāṁkhya ontology puruṣa is held to be an entity separate and clearly distinguished from the remaining 24 tattvas, belonging to Nature, in terms of epistemology it is inseparable from the natural prakṛtic processes of reflecting the Self and object. The Self, or pure consciousness is perceptually inaccessible or unknowable even for itself; the self-discrimination concerning puruṣa may only be apophatic—the Self can be known to the mind in terms of what it is not. More precisely, when the empirical seer reaches the highest point of its self-understanding it realizes fully that all that may be recognized as ‘himself’ or ‘herself’ has nothing to do with the pure consciousness (puruṣa).

#### 4. What does the ego-maker actually make?

To elucidate the significant role that the ego-making principle plays in Sāṁkhya psychology and cosmogony we need to start with a careful examination of the exact meaning of the term. It is composed of the personal pronoun ‘aham’ – ‘I’ and the suffix ‘kāra’, which has several different meanings, like: (a) making, doing, working, making a sound or utterance; (b) a maker, doer; (c) an effort, exertion, determination, religious austerity; (d) a master, lord; and also (e) killing, slaughter; (f) bringing down, humiliation<sup>10</sup>. Thus, on the grounds of Sāṁkhya philosophy we can generally determine three possible readings of ‘ahamkāra’:

<sup>9</sup> *yasya asmipratyayasya viṣesagrahaṇaṁ bhavati—śabde ‘haṁ sparśe ‘haṁ rūpe ‘ham rase’haṁ gandhe ‘ham iti* (Pandeya, p. 97).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Ed. Sir Monier Monier-Williams. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, pp. 124, 253, 274, 301.

- (1) **cosmological—cry: “*aham!*”**. The uttering ‘I’ is a key stage of world creation. It plays a similar role to an original being from Vedic cosmogony who, when about to create the world, cries out ‘Here am I’.<sup>11</sup>
- (2) **phenomenological—‘I’-making** or individuality-making, but also ‘individual’s making’ in the sense ‘making by the individual’.<sup>12</sup>
- (3) **soteriological—wrong ‘I’**, or bringing down one’s ego that is to be mastered through spiritual determination and, finally, ‘killed’ or ‘resolved’ back unto an unmanifest and unindividualized form of nature (pradhāna).

All three readings, though they arise from quite different perspectives, are complementary rather than competitive or exceptive. Ahaṃkāra in the first meaning does not function as a psychological principle but as an evolutionary and cosmic one. This cosmogony oriented understanding is characteristic of the early theistic stage of Sāṃkhya school development when ahaṃkāra was even identified with Prajāpati, the mythical Father of creation<sup>13</sup> who produces the world as sacrificial food for himself by knowledge, austerity and self-formulation. By placing the I-making principle in the sequence of the creation stages early Sāṃkhya acknowledges the ancient speculations on creation-by-naming or formation-by-formulation, which consider name and form (nāma-rūpa) to be inseparable.

However, in what sense is the emerging of ‘I’-ness or egoity necessary to manifest the world? According to the Sāṃkhya view, ahaṃkāra comes into being as a result of the proximity of two eternal realms—pure transcendental consciousness, puruṣa, or cetana, and unconscious creative nature, prakṛti, or acetana.<sup>14</sup> The former reflects itself in the cosmic intellect, buddhi, being the first manifestation of prakṛti. Thus, the universal and undifferentiated buddhi needs an individuality-making principle to make a distinction between the ego and non-ego, that is subject and object, as well as between one object and another—no matter whether inanimate or organic, human or animal, vegetal or mineral etc. If one being, or object, is not distinct from another it cannot be perceived or even exist as itself. And, similarly, if one subject is not able to distinguish itself from another self then his own experience of the world can not be possible. Therefore, ahaṃkāra, which founds both individuality and subjectivity, is absolutely essential to formulate the ego/non-ego distinction and to establish both the objective and subjective reality, or particular physical entities and their perception undertaken by the individual empirical consciousness.

<sup>11</sup> The first scholar who pointed out this understanding of ahaṃkāra was van Buitenen (1957).

<sup>12</sup> These two last meanings are suggested by Biardeau (1965), p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> In *Mahaabhārata* XII.6780, 11234, 11575, 11601 and XIV.1445, the passages recording early Sāṃkhya doctrine, where cosmological ideas are illustrated by mythological metaphors, *ahaṃkāra* is equated with Prajāpati, the Father of creation. Cf. E.H. Johnston (1937), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> SK 20: “Because of the proximity (or association) of the two —i.e. *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* — the unconscious one appears as if characterized by consciousness. Similarly, the indifferent one appears as if characterized by activity, because of the activities of the three *guṇas*”. Cf. Larson (1979), p. 262.

Another interesting issue implied by the first meaning of ahaṁkāra is its self-reflective character. The uttering ‘aham!’, though it is the second stage in the evolution of prakṛti, is the one which introduces self-discrimination and separation of ‘I’ from ‘not-I’ into the world. In Sāṁkhya this self-consciousness is not inherent to prakṛti, or nature, because it is said to be the result of the association between nature and spirit which reflects the light of consciousness in the universal intellect, buddhi.

The second meaning of ahaṁkāra indicates the significance of the phenomenal consciousness in the process of world creation. Yet, ‘creating’ in this context is equivalent to ‘reflecting’ or ‘projecting’ the empirical self on nature, prakṛti, and consequently imposing on the world the individual point of view. More precisely, one may say that all the mental and physical objects, including the agent of the empirical perception, i.e. the mind-and-senses complex, are themselves manifestations, or projections of the ego-principle. Thus, ahaṁkāra is unique in marking the common meeting point for the knower and the known alike.

In the third reading, the emphasis is placed on the self-delusive aspect of the ‘I’-making principle. The emergence of ahaṁkāra stands for the bifurcation of subjectivity into the empirical ‘I’ and the transcendental Self. And this splitting up is the root cause of ignorance (avidyā) and all mundane suffering (duḥkha). Wrong self-identification, namely the identification of the true Self with the ego, leads to a confused self-understanding and disables the realization of the true knowledge and freedom from misery. To achieve the ultimate soteriological goal, Sāṁkhya advocates dissolving ahaṁkāra through discriminative cognition (SK 2, 4) of prakṛti —both the manifest and unmanifest— and puruṣa. One may gain access to the state of liberation (mokṣa) only through the ‘implosion’ of one’s ego, which as a result of the analysis of the prakṛti’s principles (tattvas) arises in the form of discrimination: “I am not, nothing belongs to me, I do not exist” (SK 64: *nā’smi, na me, nā’ham*). What this exactly means is that I am not what I thought myself to be under the delusion during the state of bondage; I am neither my body nor the contents of my consciousness, nor ego itself. Now I have attained the knowledge of the distinction between the unchangeable and ultimate true self and the mutable phenomenal self, functioning only as a provisory and transitional subject.

Thus, according to the Sāṁkhya school, the purpose of the ego-making principle is, on the one hand, making individuality as such possible —both objective and subjective— and introducing the element of subjectivity and self-reflection into the unconscious material world. But, on the other hand, it enables the universal transcendental consciousness to evoke the personal dimension and, in consequence, to release the subject from the false self-identity with the empirical ego.

## 5. One substratum of body and mind

An ancient conception of the cosmological and psychological evolution, or *pariṇāma* recorded in *Maitrī Upaniṣad*<sup>15</sup>, was systematized by Īśvarakṛṣṇa, the author of SK, who combined it with the *guṇa* qualifications: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Without going into the details of this unique doctrine, I would like to focus only on the clues directly relevant to the ego-principle<sup>16</sup>. Generally speaking, the doctrine of the three *guṇas* says that these three constituents of Nature are inherent in every phenomenon, either physical or mental, biological, intellectual, ethical or even spiritual, and cause the differences between them by the ever varying proportions in which they enter into each. This is the theory of *guṇas* which lets us to invalidate the separation between ‘bodily’ and ‘mental’ substance. Therefore, the puzzle mutual impact, causation and conditioning of body and mind do not claim to be a serious philosophical problem in Sāṃkhya and Yoga which provide the conceptual basis to bridge this dichotomy.

If we refer the three *guṇas* to the category of the embodied ego we can reformulate their characteristics as follows. *Sattva* is the reflecting aspect of being which enables the mental representations to appear in the intellect (*buddhi*), it is the pervading component of the perceiving and feeling structures of the embodied ego. *Rajas* is the active aspect of being which predominates in the organs of perception and action, especially in *karmendriya* enabling the body to move and interact with environment. *Tamas* stands for the passive aspect of being, it predominates in the physical or gross material phenomena, including a lived body, and it stands for steadiness of the movable.

Now, one could ask if such an ontological monist position in respect to the substratum of mind and body comes up dangerously close to the physicalist hypothesis that consciousness is nothing but a product of a material brain state. It looks like the physicalist view of mind endorsed by the Sāṃkhya and Yoga analysis is generally compatible with a computational paradigm being the basis of the research programs of cognitive sciences and AI. The western functionalists assume that all cognitive phenomena, both natural and artificial, are founded on computational procedures represented in the physical systems (Schweizer, 1993, p. 336). Undoubtedly, the cognitive organs of the mind, operating within *antaḥkaraṇa* or *citta*, constitute an unconscious physical mechanism whose activities may resemble the syntactic manipulations carried out by a computer. As Paul Schweizer (1993) notices, there does not seem to be a significant difference between the mechanical activities of *manas* and *buddhi* and the computational procedures of an ‘artificially intelligent’ system, like a sophisticated robot. However, in contrast to western functionalism, Sāṃkhya and Yoga by no means can accept the idea that subjectivity and consciousness is dependent on this quasi computational structure, or may be reduced to its functions. What is more, both *darśanas* would also reject a hypothesis, proposed by John R. Searle (2004) providing a severe criticism of the classical AI position, that consciousness or genuine subjectivity naturally emerges from the physical structures of sufficient complexity or

<sup>15</sup> This conception was first mentioned in a phrase of *Maitrī Upaniṣad* VI, 10 – *triguṇabhedapariṇāmatvāt*.

<sup>16</sup> For an introduction into the *guṇa* theory cf. Rao (1963-64), pp. 61-71 and Sen Gupta (1969), pp. 75-87.

subtlety. Although in accord with Searle Sāmkhya clearly distinguishes the representational content of mind from its conscious presentation, contrary to him it would argue that ‘consciousness’ (citi) or ‘Self’ (puruṣa) name a distinct, separate entity, something over or above the neurobiological base used as its organ.

So, despite some interesting convergences a strict Sāmkhyan dualism offers quite a unique explanation of the so-called mind-body problem. Here, the thought-material of buddhi capable of conscious illumination merely allows mental events to appear conscious thanks to the refined sattvic substance of buddhi, which is transparent to the light of unconditioned consciousness. Another suitable medium and locus of awareness in the natural world is the subtle vaikṛta stuff of the mind (manas) and senses (indriya). But these organs of the empirical subject are considered to be the following evolutes of prakṛti which come into being due to the productive activity of the ego-maker (ahaṁkāra). There is some disagreement between Vijñānabhikṣu and Īśvarakṛṣṇa about the interpretation of the subsequent stages of parināma, the evolution or nature (prakṛti). According to the first interpretation (SK 25) sātṛvika ahaṁkāra, also called vaikṛta, makes the ‘group of eleven’ (manas, five buddhiindriyas or organs of perceptions, and five karmendriyas or organs of action); from tāmasa ahaṁkāra, also called bhūtādi, emerges at the same time the ‘group of five’ (tanmātras), which in turn produce another ‘group of five’ (five bhūtas or gross elements). Whereas the taijasa aspect of ahaṁkāra, predominated by guṇa rajas, sharing in both creations, provides the motive force or energy to the former ones. In Vijñānabhikṣu’s understanding (*Sāmkhyapravacānabhāṣya* ad *Sāmkhyasūtra* 2, 18) all three aspects of ahaṁkāra, which he calls vaikaṛka, taijasa and tāmasa, are directly active and productive in the course of parināma, giving birth to manas, ten indriyas and five tanmātras, respectively.

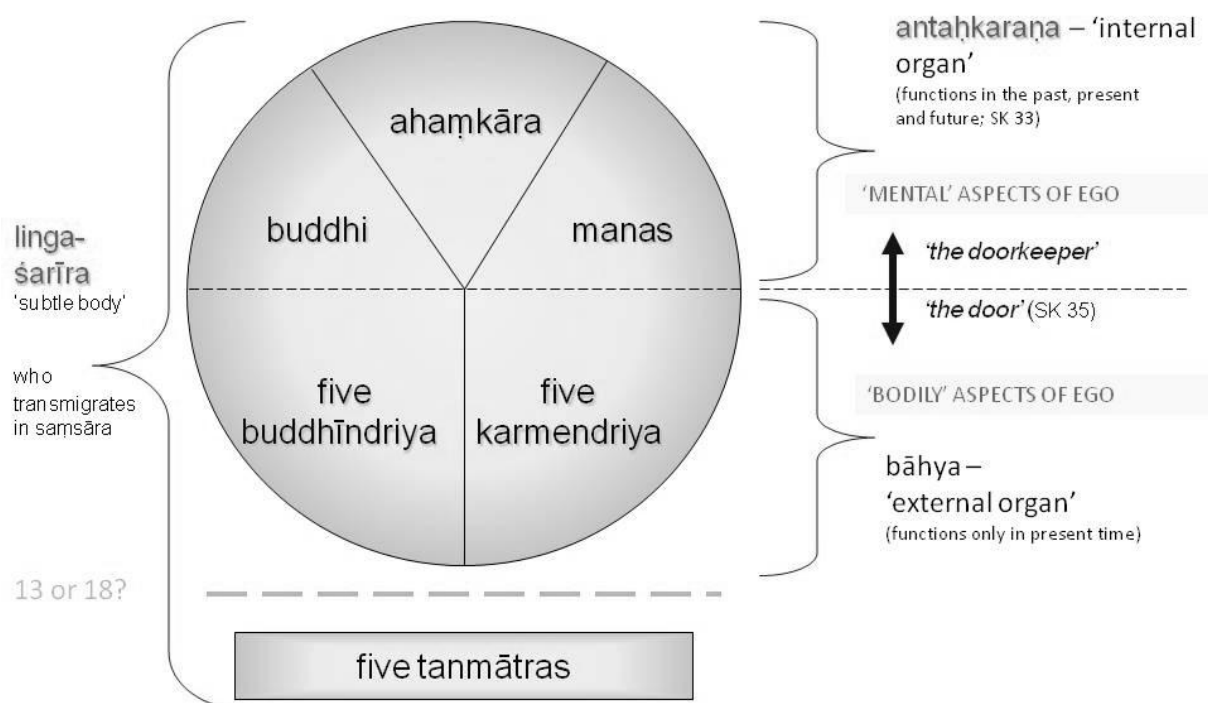
## 6. What is it like to be the true subject?

As Thomas Nagel (1974) remarks in his famous paper, while arguing against functionalist types of materialism, although we use a sonar, or echolocation, and learn nearly everything about the way a bat perceives, we will never find out what it is like to *be* a bat. And it is not because our knowledge is limited but rather that even to form a *conception* of what it is like to be a bat, one must take up the bat’s point of view. Here, one can risk using this observation to elucidate, by analogical reasoning, the central riddle of the Sāmkhya and Yoga dualism. Though we can tell much about our mind’s content, our conscious states or even the complex inter-conditioning and relationship between bodily and mental events, by no means are we able to say what it is like to *be consciousness*, or to be what makes the physical or mental representations conscious and understandable. Being consciousness (citi), or the true Self (puruṣa), is unimaginable for the empirical subject simply because there is no point of view, no ego-maker anymore beyond the realm of the conscious phenomena. What may be surprising, however, especially for the western philosopher, is that the phenomenal self, centered and united by ahaṁkāra apparently meets most of the twelve criteria commonly required for subjectivity,

like having one's own perspective, intentionality, being an agent, having a sense of titularity or ownness, having a privileged access to one's mind's contents, proprioception, ipseity or spacio-temporal self-recognition, feeling one's uniqueness etc. (de Sousa: 2002).

As far as Sāṃkhya is concerned the complex structure and inner dynamism of the empirical subject can be best illustrated by Chart no 3 presenting *karāṇa*—the instrument or means of 'making' the phenomenal self, which characterizes the embodied ego, or subtle body (*sūkṣmaśarīra*) who transmigrates from life to life (SK 31, 32, 35).

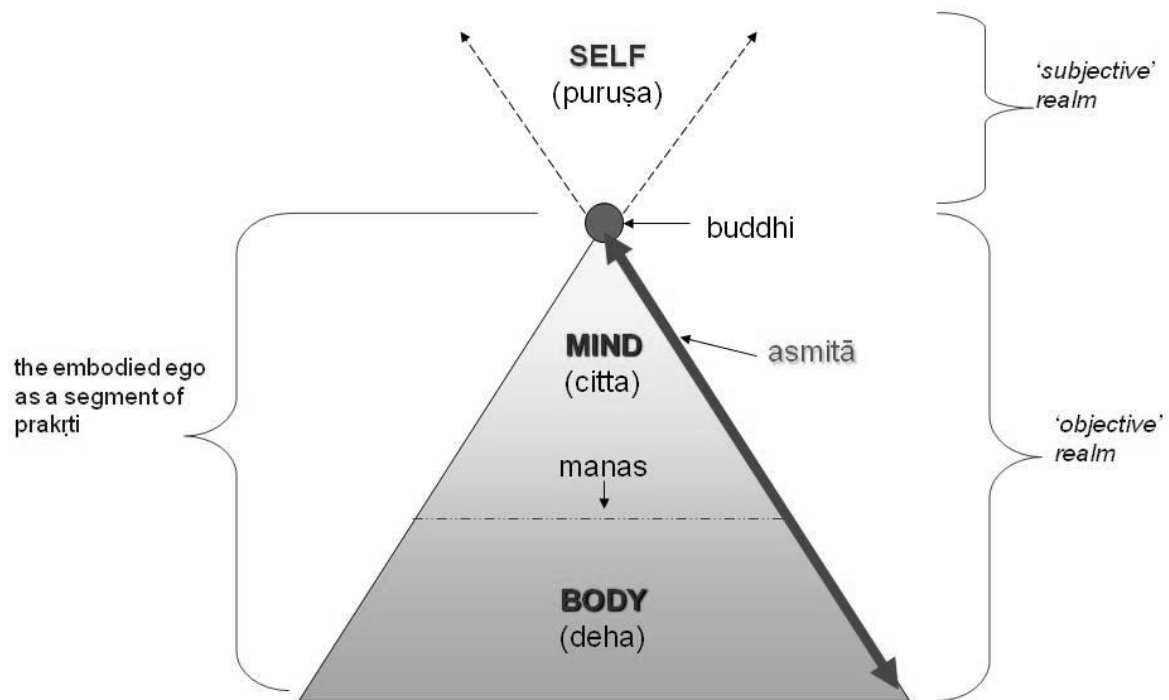
Fig. 3. *The liṅga = karāṇa, 'instrument' (acc. to SK)*



Another chart demonstrates the ontological structure of a human being in the state of contact (*saṃyoga*) of the 'subjective' and 'objective' realms seen from the perspective of YS and *Yogasūtrabhāṣya* II.19<sup>17</sup>. Comparing these two figures one can notice some terminological differences between both darśanas (the term 'ahaṃkāra' is often replaced in Yoga by 'asmitā'), which does not, however, influence the univocal statement of Sāṃkhya nad Yoga with regard to the Mind-Consciousness Problem.

<sup>17</sup> This diagram is a slightly modified version of Feuerstein's chart (1975), p. 144.

Fig. 4. *The ontological structure of human being*  
 in the state of contact (*saṃyoga*) of the 'subjective' and 'objective' realms (acc. to YS & YBH II. 19)



## 7. Movement as a bodily and mental function

Simultaneously to discrediting the subjective autonomy and self-luminosity of the mental representations (*cittavṛttis*), Yoga emphasizes the crucial role the embodied ego plays in all vital processes within the empirical consciousness. Since mind and body as well as environment are considered to belong to the same metaphysical realm, then mental content can both naturally cause and be caused by other physical events. Despite the serious differences mentioned above, some contemporary western categorizations sound pretty well in tune with the intuitions of the Indian darśanas, for instance the currents of phenomenology represented by the followers of Merleau-Ponty. By introducing the concept of 'my own body' (*corps propre*) the author of *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) managed to display a unique non-objective aspect of our body. What he calls the 'subject' of perception in his major work and then 'flesh' in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) is a notion which is formed to express the intertwining and reversibility of the sensate and the sensible. This reversibility makes problematic anew the concept of intentionality. Now, both Merleau-Ponty and Sāṃkhya-Yoga admit that my body is not merely a carrier of the consciousness because it is what makes the consciousness work efficiently<sup>18</sup>, so intentionality does not refer to my body to any lesser

<sup>18</sup> Let us point to an obvious example when a seriously disabled body, especially with an injured brain, does not allow consciousness to do its job.

extent than to my mind. Certainly, what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘consciousness’, Patañjali would rather name ‘citta’, the phenomenal consciousness, and Īśvarakṛṣṇa would name ‘antaḥkaraṇa’.

When refuting the objective status of ‘my body’ and saying that “it is not an object among other objects”, Merleau-Ponty gives three arguments, which—I suppose—may be also accepted by Sāṃkhya. Firstly, we discover the subjective potential of our body when we realize that it disposes the ‘duplicated sensations’—while my hand is touching the things it is itself subject to being touched. So, our bodily subjectivity, being the source perceptive structure, comes from its self-reflexiveness or circularity. Secondly, ‘my body’ cannot be just an object as it lets me experience itself, for instance feel my toothache, in quite a different manner than I feel all other neutral objects. And thirdly, the presence of what the psychologists call ‘the kinesthetic sensations’ reveals some ‘magic’, or at least other than physical, connections between my own decisions and the movements of my body. In other words, it reveals the source motricity, or rudimentary function of movement. For Sāṃkhya and Yoga movement is characteristic to prakṛti thanks to its constituent defined as guṇa rajas. It means that movement happens spontaneously both in organisms and inanimate forms of nature, both in the body, or physical forms of Nature predominated by tamas, and in the mind, or sattvic thought-stuff. Thus, the rudimentary functions of the embodied ego, both implied by Sāṃkhya and Yoga and Merleau-Ponty’s writing, embrace intentionality, self-reflexiveness and activity, including motricity.

Incidentally, both Indian views and the phenomenological observations brought out of the reflexive analysis rather than a synthesis of the biological data seem to be perfectly in line with some conclusions made recently by neuroscientists, among others Rodolfo Llinás. In his book *I of the Vortex* (2001) he presents the results of his own three decades of brain research and neurophilosophical thinking. While discussing action, consciousness, and self Llinás proposes a conception of mind, or ‘mindness state’ as he prefers to call it, which is ‘that class of all functional brain states in which sensorimotor images, including self-awareness, are generated’ (Llinás, 2001, p. 1). Mind, he says, coincides with functional brain states and has evolved as a goal-oriented device that implements predictive interactions between the organism and its environment. Most interestingly, having a brain proves to be necessary only for these multicellular creatures which move actively. The ‘capacity to predict the outcome of future events—critical to successful movement—is, most likely, the ultimate and most common of all global brain functions’ (Llinás, 2001, p. 21). Thus, having a nervous system is an exclusive property of motricity which is at the centre of the evolution of neuronal activities. In other words, says Llinás, mindness and thinking are the evolutionary internalization of movement as the brain’s control of organized movements gave birth to the generation and nature of the mind. Therefore, he concludes, the self is the centralization of prediction. Llinás illustrates his observations with lots of data but one of his favorite examples seems to be a tunicate or ‘sea squirt’ (*Ascidacea*), which he humorously compares to some human academics upon obtaining university tenure. First, in its larval form, a tunicate equipped with a ganglion containing approximately 300 cells, goes through a brief phase of free swimming. Then upon finding a suitable substrate, it buries its



head into the selected location to become sessile, and finally achieving its maturity a tunicate absorbs most of its tiny brain and nervous system and returns to a rather primitive condition. It looks as if the brain becomes useless since there is no need to move anymore. Sticking to this humorous tone, one could ask here, weather the tunicates and yogins have anything in common, since the most appropriate bodily state, recommended by Patañjali for a serious meditator is āsana defined as ‘steadiness and ease’?<sup>19</sup> Well, in the context of the advanced spiritual practice suggested by Yoga, the restraint of any movement, both bodily and mental, or even the subtlest, non-conscious flow of the inner breath (prāṇāyāma) is to achieve the ultimate soteriological goal, which is dis-identifying oneself with all that is knowable and becoming that which is absolutely unpredictable and unimaginable from the perspective of the ego-centered, brain-based empirical consciousness.

### Concluding remarks

- (1) The concept of ‘ahaṁkāra’ goes beyond a traditional western conceptual dichotomy of body-mind and clearly challenges it. The ego-maker cannot be satisfactorily captured as long as we apply, when defining it, the categories influenced by a Cartesian or post-Cartesian perspective. Therefore, it involves the necessity for a re-categorization of the philosophical investigations on consciousness and the self.
- (2) Though ahaṁkāra plays most of the functions ascribed to subjectivity in the western tradition, which is often identified with the ‘first person’ point of view, we have to objectivize the ego-maker or look at it from the ‘third person’ point of view to explain its sense.
- (3) The ego-maker establishes the empirical subject, characterized as active, individual and intentional, which is opposed to the absolute Self. As the root of the phenomenal self it involves all six aspects of subjectivity recognized in YS and SK, namely: perceiving, cognizing, personalizing oneself, owning, being self-aware, dis-identifying oneself.
- (4) Ahaṁkāra constitutes the center for all experience; it unifies all functions of body and mind, including the sensory-motor system.
- (5) Monism, quasi-physicalism, or more specifically the ontological continuity of triṅgaṇa body and mind accepted by Sāṁkhya and Yoga, does not imply elimination of the problem of subjectivity nor require reducing consciousness to matter, because the ego-maker by no means can replace the true Self believed to be the transcendent principle of consciousness which only allows the embodied ego to appear subjective.

<sup>19</sup> YS II.46: *sthīrasukham āsanam*.

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