Universe and Inner Self in Early Indian and Early Greek Thought

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Published by Edinburgh University Press

Seaford, Richard.
Universe and Inner Self in Early Indian and Early Greek Thought.
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Can a comparison between Indian and Greek philosophies abstract from history? Most scholars would agree that to isolate philosophical positions from the socio-cultural history in which they were formulated is artificial and problematic, but the question then becomes what sort of history is needed. Of course the Vedas were preceded by the Indus Valley civilisation and Homer by the Mycenaeans, but such precursors cast little light on philosophy and can be left to other specialists. So histories of Sanskrit thinking usually start with the *Rgveda*, much as their Greek equivalents start with Homer. No doubt many scholars take for granted that no other style of history is or ever will be feasible.

The assumption is paradoxical, however, since, as languages, Sanskrit and Greek have histories that go back well before the Vedas and Homer. For two centuries philologists have been writing their own sort of history, embodying many of their findings in the starred forms they attribute to the Indo-European protolanguage (usually dated to the fourth millennium BCE). This history involves semantics as well as phonology, and the well-known work of Benveniste (1969) studied the vocabulary of Indo-European institutions. Equally well-recognised are Calvert Watkins (1995), who applied a similar approach to the history of Indo-European poetical phraseology, and Martin West (2007), who in addition tackled some particular constructs found in Indo-European myth and epic.

More immediately relevant is the vast corpus of comparativism produced by Georges Dumézil (1898–1986), much of it addressing the Indo-European ‘trifunctional ideology’. Leaving the functions till later, I emphasise the word ‘ideology’, which Dumézil defines in various ways. Depending on viewpoint, it can be defined ‘either as a means of exploring material and moral reality or as a means of ordering the capital of ideas accepted by the society’. It was ‘at once an ideal and a way of analysing and interpreting the forces that ensure the smooth running of the world (*le cours du monde*) and the life of men’. Trifunctionality was ‘the framework (*cadre*) of a system of thought, an explanation of the world,
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in brief a theology and a philosophy, or, if you like, an ideology’\(^1\). Elsewhere he puts in parallel the words mythology, theology and ideology as meaning respectively the collection or catalogue of myths, of gods and of governing ideas (\textit{idées directrices}).\(^2\) Thus, although he does not use the term, in talking of an Indo-European ideology Dumézil is postulating a proto-philosophy lying behind the thinking of these early literate societies. If one wants to situate Sanskrit and Greek philosophy within history, here is an historical approach that possesses a considerable literature and at least merits serious consideration.

Many factors have contributed to the relative neglect of Dumézil’s approach. Obstacles internal to the oeuvre include its sheer bulk (some seventeen volumes published or reissued after 1966 – the year he saw as opening his \textit{phase du bilan}, his ‘summing up period’). The books are not particularly repetitive, and their range of reference makes considerable demands on the serious reader. I would add that the correlational type of ideology is postulated without explicit reference to anthropological literature on classification, and thereby risks appearing odder than it is;\(^3\) also that (as we shall see later), the trifunctional schema by itself is too narrow to constitute a plausible ideology. External obstacles include the conservatism of academic disciplines, criticisms by opponents of cultural comparison and controversies among its practitioners, and the play of fashion.\(^4\) But the difficulties and objections can be overcome and Dumézil-style work continues.

Much of this comparativism explores the survival of the ideology in different contexts – socio-structural, legal, mythic, ritual and so on, but Dumézil never claimed that the Indo-European cultural heritage could be reduced to manifestations of trifunctionality – indeed he protested against such reduction.\(^5\) Much scope exists for comparison of narratives to which the functions are not immediately relevant, and this is how I shall start: the conceptual simplicity of the argument makes it an appropriate opening to the empirical part of the paper. If the units of a Sanskrit story, one after another, resemble the units of a Greek story, and the resemblances are unforced and persuasive, then the more numerous the resemblances the stronger the case for common origin. Logically, to

\(^2\) Dumézil 1986: 19; a meaning of ideology that he describes as ‘very humble’.
\(^3\) Allen 2000: 39–60.
\(^4\) Here is an outspoken but not unrepresentative opinion: ‘Wide-ranging comparison has consistently disappointed. Books of Lévi-Strauss, Dumézil and Eliade now sit beside those of Max Müller and Frazer as cautionary examples. They consistently misrecognised products of their own imagination and desire (human mind, tripartite ideology, homo religiosus) for objects having historical, prehistorical and/or transhistorical actuality’ (Lincoln 2012: 100).
\(^5\) Dumézil 1981: 34.
compare Sanskrit and Greek manifestations of a hypothetical ideology is a more complex undertaking.

**Otherworld journeys**

The relation between this world and other worlds has been a traditional philosophical issue pertaining to cosmology and eschatology, but it is a relation that is often spatialised and presented as a journey: an obvious instance is Er’s return journey to the other world, narrated at the very end of Plato’s *Republic*. However, of the two journeys we shall compare, only the Sanskrit one is straightforwardly cosmic and eschatological. The *Kauśītaki Upaniṣad* is among the five early *Upaniṣads* that were written in prose and are probably pre-Buddhist. Like some others of the five, it is an anthology of ‘material that must have existed as independent texts’, before being put together by one or more editors. The material that concerns us (KauU 1.2–7) is one such unit of text or pericope. It tells us what happens to the souls of the dead, and is preceded (1.1) by a scene-setting account of why Citra Gāngyāyani (doubtless a king) came to be teaching a Brahmin.

To summarise *Kauśītaki Upaniṣad* 1.2, all who die go to the moon, which is the door to the heavenly world. The moon asks the soul ‘Who are you?’, and those unable to answer correctly turn into rain and fall to earth for rebirth, in higher or lower forms depending on their behaviour and knowledge. Breaking into verse, the text gives the correct answer, and those who know it are allowed to proceed on the path of the gods. Our concern is primarily with this *devayāna* (as distinct from the *pitṛyāna*, the path of the fathers or ancestors).

In 1.3, the knowledgeable soul traverses the worlds of Agni, Vāyu, Varuṇa, Indra and Prajāpati, before reaching that of *brahman* or Brahmā (the neuter abstraction and the masculine deity often merge in Sanskrit, which lacks capital letters, and Olivelle writes only the former). Nothing further is said about the first five, but the passage through the final world (Brahmāloka) is presented initially as a summary. The phrase *sa āgacchati*, ‘he arrives at’, introduces each one of the ten locations, which are then given a shorter or longer comment. Brahmā is the end-point of the journey.

The Greek comparandum picks up the voyage of Odysseus after he leaves Ogygia and follows him until his first night in Alcinous’ palace (*Od*. 5.282–7.347). Vast and obvious differences separate the two travellers. Odysseus is an epic hero from ancient times, but within the story he is very much alive. The

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Vedic figure is nameless since he represents any Upaniṣadic contemporary who knows the answer to the moon’s question; and he has certainly died. However, our focus will be less on the travellers than the journey.

1. The lake Āra. ‘He crosses it with his mind, but those who go into it without a complete knowledge drown in it.’ Compare the wily and tenacious Odysseus who, despite nearly drowning in the storm sent by Poseidon, succeeds, with the help of other deities, in completing his sea-crossing from Ogygia to Scheria. The Sanskrit word for the lake is hrada, ‘a large or deep piece of water, lake, pool (only rarely applied to the sea),’ but commentators compare the name Āra with Ara, one of two seas (arṇava) situated in the world of Brahmā (ChU 8.5.3–4).

2. The watchmen Muhūrta, who flee from him. The name refers to a duration of about forty-eight minutes, but neither the reading nor the meaning is clear and I defer discussion.

3. The river Vijarā (‘Ageless’), which he crosses with just his mind. The comments here are substantial (fifteen lines in the translation), but only need selective treatment. Having crossed the river, the traveller shakes off his good and bad deeds (respectively onto the relatives he likes and dislikes), then proceeds freed from them. Compare the unnamed river or River God, who helps Odysseus exit from the sea, and into which the hero then throws or drops his buoyancy-aid-cum-headdress. He had received it from the goddess Ino, who had requested its return, which the river duly performs (5.346–51, 459–62).

The scene shifts for a moment to Brahmā (presumably in his palace). The god knows that the soul has reached the river, and instructs five hundred nymphs (apsaras) to go there quickly and welcome him. Each group of a hundred carries something different: garlands, lotions or ointment (āñjana), cosmetic powders, clothes and fruit. The beloved Mānasī (from manas ‘mind’) and her twin or counterpart Cākṣuṣī (cakṣus ‘eye, seeing, sight’) bring the flowers they have picked, and three additional females are named. The welcome party adorns the traveller with Brahmā’s ornaments, and he proceeds.

After Odysseus lands and falls asleep on a hillock, the scene shifts (6.1–84). Wanting to help the hero return to Ithaca, the goddess Athena visits Alcinous’ palace. Taking the form of Nausicaa’s friend and age-mate (homēlikiē), the daughter of Dymas, Athena gives the sleeping princess the idea of making a laundry trip to the mouth of the Scherian river; her father should arrange transport. In the morning Alcinous cheerfully agrees, and a mule wagon is loaded not only with laundry but also with supplies of food, drink and olive oil for bathing. Nausicaa sets off on it, accompanied by her age-mate and maid-servants. The females do not know that they will meet and help Odysseus, and Athena intervenes again to bring this about. The princess ensures that the hero receives oil for his bath in the river, then clothes, food and drink, and advises him on the journey to the city.
The shared features are as follows: exit from river and the discarding into it of something no longer needed; scene-shift; deity’s initiative to encourage or help the traveller; involvement of the palace owner (so Brahmā parallels Athena plus Alcinous); journey by a group of young females; their supplies, which include oil, clothes and edibles; their paired leadership (two twins or age-mates); meeting of females and traveller beside river; beautification of traveller by females (he acquires adornments or clothes). Moreover, of the three other named celestial females, two, Ambā and Ambālī, are paired as Jagatī (possibly a reference to heaven and earth): compare the two beautiful handmaiden who sleep on either side of the entry to Nausicaa’s bedroom (6.18–19).  

The next five Vedic locations have in common their almost cursory treatment. A measure of unity is also provided by a feature discussed later, but for now we need only the Greek comparanda.

4. The tree Ilya. Compare the poplar grove, sacred to Athena, situated within shouting distance of the city (6.291–4, 321–2), where Odysseus is to leave the maidens and wait for a while. The grove, with its environs (spring, meadow, park, vineyard), is the only topographical feature mentioned by Homer between the water-meadow and the lofty city walls.

5. The plaza (saṃsthāna, ‘urban public place’) Sālajaya. Compare the agoras that Odysseus admires in the Phaeacian capital (7.44, cf. 6.266).

6. The palace Aparājita (‘Invincible’). Compare the dwelling or palace of Alcinous (his dōma, dōmata or domos).

7. The doorkeepers Indra and Prajāpati, who flee from him. Compare the immortal and ageless dogs made of gold and silver by the god Hephaestus, and stationed as guards on either side of the entrance to the palace (7.91–4).

8. The hall Vibhu (‘Extensive’). Compare the hall (megaron, 6.304) in which the royal couple sit, together with other Phaeacian nobles.

The two remaining locations are again treated in parallel.

9. The throne Vicakṣaṇa (‘Radiant, Far-shining’). Nothing is said about anyone sitting on it. Instead, the paired components of the throne – front legs, back legs, lengthwise supports and side-supports – are correlated with pairs of named sāman chants, and the whole throne is identified with wisdom. Ignoring all this, simply compare the object with the throne of Alcinous (6.308), and with the silver-studded thronos next to it, which the king’s favourite son vacates for Odysseus (7.162, 167–71). At just this point Odysseus is described as ‘wise and crafty-minded’ (daïphrōn, poikilomētēs, 7.168).

10. The couch or bed Amitaujas (‘Of unlimited power’), which is life-breath

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7 The third, Ambikā, is mentioned simply as another nymph. Discussing the journey, Ruben (1947: 226–31) remarks on what a beautiful story it could be if only Citra were not so wooden (hölzern). Did Ruben have the Odyssey in mind?
(prāṇa). The component parts again receive correlates (only two of the pairs are linked with particular sāman chants), but instead of eight parts there are thirteen, and the extra ones include the longitudinal and transverse strings, two layers of bedding and a pillow. Compare the bed on the portico where Odysseus sleeps after talking to the royals (7.335–8, 345): it is covered with three layers of bedding and the bedstead is described as ‘pierced’ (trētos) – ‘in order to take the cords that served as mattress’.8

The traveller mounts the couch on which Brahmā is sitting, is questioned by the god, gives satisfactory philosophico-religious answers, and is accepted into the god’s world (1.6–7). Here ends the first section (adhyāya) of this Upaniṣad, and the next one, unrelated to the scene set in Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad 1.1, is not about dead souls. The pairing of the new arrival and his host, who must be sitting side by side on the couch, finds a parallel of sorts in the pairing of Odysseus and the royal couple: the text moves directly from the former, sleeping on the portico, to the latter, sleeping in an inner chamber (346–7). These two lines conclude book 7.

However, to find a comparison for Brahmā’s questioning of the new arrival, we must turn back to the Greek throne room (location 9). After the Phaeacian nobles have dispersed, Queen Arete puts the first question asked of Odysseus: who is he and from where (7.238). Brahmā opens his interview with the same question, ‘Who are you?’; Sanskrit ko ʿsi and Greek τίϛ εἰς are etymologically cognate. Neither respondent offers anything so banal as a name, parent or place of birth, but even so they both quickly gain the questioner’s approval. Brahmā says his world is now the traveller’s. If Odysseus decides to stay, Alcinous offers him marriage to Nausicaa and a respectable place in Phaeacian society (7.311–15).

So far the focus has been on comparing the journeys location by location, but the locations can also be compared in groups. Roughly speaking, the first three are watery and peripheral; the next five are transitional and move towards a centre; the final two form a climax.

The three watery locations: The Vedic lake and river parallel the Greek sea and river, but we offered no Greek comparison for the second location, that of the watchmen Muhūrta, who flee. If one accepts Olivelle’s translation of the uncertain text, one seeks a parallel in the watery section of the Greek; but the only other location identified by agents rather than objects is the seventh, that with the two doorkeeper gods, who also flee (same verb: apa, ‘away’ + √dru, ‘run, hasten, flee’). One therefore looks for agents who might have blocked the traveller’s progress, but do not do so. Poseidon sees Odysseus from a distant mountain (5.282–3), gives him a hard time during the storm, watches him

suffer until he starts swimming, and then departs for his own palace, lashing his horses.

The transitional locations: In the Sanskrit these are held together by references to the senses. At the tree the soul is permeated by Brahmā’s fragrance (implying smell), at the plaza by the god’s flavour (taste), at the palace by his radiance (vision). This sequence forms the start of a standard rising hierarchy of senses which ends with hearing, and the last quality to permeate the soul (at the hall) is Brahmā’s yaśas, his glory or fame; so perhaps here, in this oral culture, fame is linked with hearing; and perhaps too, though the text does not say so, the remaining sense, namely touch, correlates with Indra. In any case, with the radiance (tejas) from Brahmā’s palace compare the radiance (aiglē, 7.84) from the palace of Alcinous. Moreover, the first transitional location in the Sanskrit sees the start of the sequence of senses, and in the Greek marks the hero’s separation from Nausicaa’s party and a new phase of his journey. Henceforth, as Odysseus moves from nature to culture, the locations he comes to are associated only with human artefacts and deities.

The climactic locations: These are both items of palace furniture on which humans can place themselves, whether to sit or lie. One or other is the site of the final host-traveller conversation, and the second forms the end of a significant textual unit.

In concentrating on Brahmā’s world, we have ignored the soul’s earlier post-mortem travel. Like everyone who dies, he begins by going to the moon, where his knowledge enables him to escape from the round of births and deaths on earth and to take the more desirable path of devayāna. Compare Odysseus, whose qualities of character enable him to avoid drowning along with his crew after the visit to Thrinacia (12.416–19), so that he can do as he wishes and return eventually to wife and family. But between leaving the moon and reaching Brahmāloka the soul comes to (āgacchati again) five other worlds. In the sequence Agni-Vāyu-Varuṇa the first two theonyms mean Fire and Wind, and the third is a god of waters. With the traverse of the world of Wind, compare Odysseus’ double visit to the isle of Aeolus, Controller of the Winds (10.1–76).

These two pre-Brahmāloka rapprochements are somewhat weakened by the fact that in Odysseus’ life story the separation from his crew comes after his visit to Aeolus, rather than preceding it. Within Brahmāloka this sort of objection applies only to the conversations at the climax locations. Otherwise, locations and events follow the same order in the two stories: the tree Ilya resembles the poplar grove not only qua arboreal but also in that the tree/grove appears after

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9 The sequence smell-sight-hearing-taste-manual action appears in KauU 1.7.
10 The timing of the devayāna is indeterminate, but the palace bed on which Odysseus ends his first day in Scheria contrasts with the outdoor bed of leaves on which he began it.
the river scene and before the plaza/agora. The positional similarity reinforces the intrinsic similarity.

The similarities relevant here are those that can reasonably be understood as deriving from an Indo-European (or at least Greco-Aryan) protonarrative, but it is difficult, and probably unnecessary, to formulate rules for recognising such a similarity and for deciding whether or not it is outweighed by the differences, which of course can always be found. Even so, and without claiming any precision, one can ask roughly how many rapprochements we have found for the Brahmāloka journey. Including the groups of locations, but ignoring positionality and a few relatively weak comparisons (e.g. Poseidon as watchman, Nausicaa’s paired beautiful handmaidens, Odysseus’ wisdom at location 9), I estimate more than twenty-five. This degree of similarity, bearing both on structure and details, cannot plausibly be explained except by some common origin.

I hope then to have persuaded readers both that Citra’s dry eschatological doctrine is cognate with the epic adventures in Homer, and that comparisonism based on linguistic common origin need not be speculative, superficial or neglectful of philological detail. Some may still worry that our *Upāniṣad* was written down too late in the history of Sanskrit literature to have retained narrative content that bypassed the earlier Vedas – copious as they are; but such worries overlook the dimension of secrecy in the transmission of the Vedas, and also rest on a historiographic prejudice. In fact, previous work along similar lines provides reassurance: the *Mahābhārata*, written down perhaps half a millennium after our *Upāniṣad*, also contains much narrative that is cognate with Homer and that bypassed earlier Sanskrit literature.

In particular, the Great Epic narrates several otherworld journeys, and notably one by its central hero: Arjuna goes to heaven to visit his divine father Indra in his palace in the city of Amarāvatī (from *amara*, ‘immortal’). His journey too is cognate with that of Odysseus to the palace of Alcinous, and a fuller study of the Brahmāloka journey would benefit from this additional comparison. Moreover, the comparison can also be extended to the internal journey of the yogin, directed towards the mental state of *kaivalya*, and to the progress of the Buddha to Enlightenment. The Upaniṣadic eschatology belongs to a family of narratives that includes not only epic adventures but also spiritual undertakings;

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11 At the river Vijarā the text compares the soul shaking off his deeds to a man driving a chariot who looks down at its two wheels and sees nights and days, good deeds and bad ones, and all the pairs of opposites. Compare Arjuna’s views from the celestial chariot that takes him from the Himalayas to heaven (3.43.26ff., 3.164.40ff. in the Critical Edition). The theme of the traveller being tested by a deity is clearer in the Sanskrit epic than in the Greek.

and as we shall see, codifications of Hindu philosophy include yoga among their six categories.

**Philosophy and the functions**

Dumézil saw Indo-European ideology as made up of three components: the first function (F1) related to sovereignty, the sacred and wisdom; the second (F2) to physical force; the third (F3) to fecundity and wealth. Full formal definitions can be found in Dumézil, but these succinct indications will suffice here. Though an important manifestation of the ideology is in the ideal division of labour in society – into the descending hierarchy of priests, warriors and producers – social structure is, as we noted above, only one of the many contexts in which the same pattern occurs. But even at this point in the argument, worries may arise. Supernatural assistance, reliable defence, a flourishing economy – all these are desirable, even necessary, for a well-functioning society, but are they sufficient basis for a worldview? Do not ideologies typically have a place for what is undesirable and devalued – phenomena like demons, death, pollution and enemies?

To make a long story short, already in 1961, the Rees brothers, analysing the fivefold sacred geography of Ireland, proposed in effect that Dumézil’s model – useful, indeed essential, as far as it went – needed to be expanded from three categories to five, and I have long argued that they were right. We need not only an extra category at the bottom of the hierarchy, but also a readjustment at the top. We can leave priests and their specialised wisdom in F1, but sovereignty needs a separate category relating to transcendence, totality and creation. The new categories, bracketing the old, sometimes hang together, and for this reason among others, I label them respectively F4- and F4+ (the minus and plus referring to negative and positive valuation). The model as a whole I label ‘pentadic’.

The pentadic ideology has shaped so much of Indian life and thought that the choice of starting point is difficult. One option would focus on social structure, citing the brief myth of origin of the varṇas in the Puruṣasūkta (RV 10.90.11–12) and relating it to caste, while another might start from Vedic sacrifice, the theme that dominates the Brāhmaṇa texts. Yet a third could follow the Reeses and open with the spatial schema of centre and cardinal points. However, for specifically philosophical thought the obvious choice is Sāṃkhya.

The medieval classification of orthodox Hindu philosophies mentioned above organises its six ‘views’ (darśanas, from drś, ‘see’) into pairs, and couples Sāṃkhya with Yoga. Sāṃkhya is widely regarded as the first of the six to have

15 See respectively Allen 2007 and Allen 2015.
been systematised, and was immensely influential on the others – it provided yoga with its metaphysical assumptions. The name, from *sāṃkhya*, ‘reckon up, enumerate, calculate’, already suggests the developed theory, which lists twenty-five principles or realities (*tattvas*), and can be read as supplying an ontology both for the cosmos and for individual psycho-physiology.¹⁶ Thus Puruṣa, the first *tattva* in typical lists, can be read both as an update of the creative Puruṣa of *Ṛgveda* 10.90 and as *puruṣa*, ‘man, human being, person’. The theory is emphatically soteriological and dualist. The aim is to recognise the fundamental difference between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* (‘nature or Nature’, which covers all the remaining *tattvas*), and by doing so to bring ‘the adherent to the condition of isolation (*kaivalya*) or release (*mokṣa*)’.¹⁷

Whereas yoga starts from the pluralistic here-and-now and works towards *kaivalya*, Sāṃkhya, starting from the holistic and abstract, moves towards the plural and concrete, by laying down processes of evolution or emergence. But the emergence of *tattvas* is not presented simply as a sequence; the list is structured into five sets of five. The first pentad, too complex for a truly satisfactory discussion here, contains three successive evolutes from *prakṛti*, including *ahaṃkāra*, roughly ‘the ego’ (from *aham*, ‘I’, cognate with Latin and English *ego*, and *kāra*, ‘maker’). From this ego-principle evolve three of the remaining four pentads: the senses, the organs or capacities for action, and the subtle elements. It is as if they were three successive sets of quintuplets, born to one father, for the last member of one pentad precedes the first of the next, but does not emanate it. The final pentad, the gross elements, emerges from the subtle ones.

The twenty-five-*tattva* doctrine as presented in the *Sāṃkhyakārika* is relatively late (fourth century CE or later), and specialists have studied earlier texts in the hope of working out its development. An interesting phrase occurs in the oldest *Upaniṣad*, in a discussion of the nature of *brahman*. In *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.17 Yājñavalkya says that within *brahman* are established *pañca pañcajanā ākāśaśca*, which Olivelle translates as ‘the various groups of five, together with space’. He thinks that ‘the repetition of *pañca* is meant to indicate an indeterminate number of such groups’, and cites some possible instances; but he recognises ‘five groups of five’ as an alternative rendering.¹⁸ Anyway, whatever the verdict in this case, developed Sāṃkhya offers a pentad of pentads, and we need to consider the higher-level set as well as the five lower-level ones.

At the lower level the first five *tattvas* seem to have conflated several

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¹⁶ Wanting to maximise the philosophical coherence of Sāṃkhya, Burley 2007 attacks the cosmological reading, but I mainly follow Larson 1979. Both books include a text and translation of the *Sāṃkhyakārika*.


¹⁸ Olivelle 1998: 520.
different ideas, but pentadic theory focuses on the relation between puruṣa and prakṛti, and the composition of prakṛti. Puruṣa is contentless consciousness, inactive and detached, yet at the same time fundamental. It is close to and observes, even enjoys, prakṛti, which covers not only materiality but also much that Westerners would label ‘mental’. While puruṣa is a masculine word and prakṛti feminine, the two are not presented as relating sexually. Nevertheless, the implicit maleness of Puruṣa, combined with his otherness relative to Nature in general, makes him a potential representative of the transcendent category F4+. Prakṛti is complex: she or it has two conditions – unmanifest and manifest, and is composed of three ‘qualities’ (guṇas, literally ‘strands’). Extraordinarily widespread in ordinary life, as well as in philosophy, the guṇas, which are not tattvas, form a descending hierarchy: sattva, rajas and tamas were characterised by Dasgupta as intelligence stuff, energy stuff and mass stuff. Despite Dumézil’s doubts and a weakish argument regarding tamas, the triad can be taken to represent F1–2–3; and the fourth tattva, the ego-principle, associated with devalued ‘self-conceit’, can represent F4+. This interpretation is presented by Allen, and if it is on the right lines, the third tattva (buddhi, ‘intelligence’) and the fifth (manas, ‘mind’) must be extrinsic ideas included for one reason or another.

The other pentads are more straightforward. The second and third derive from the ego-principle in its sattva mode, the fourth from the same principle in its tamas mode. The second coheres neatly with the fourth: hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting, smelling correspond to sound, touch, form, taste, smell. The third, the organs of action, also corresponds more or less – speaking, grasping, walking around, making love, excreting. The fifth lists the elements as we normally understand the word.

The set of five pentads form a descending hierarchy with a one-three-one structure. The first pentad, with its internal complexity, contains the really fundamental tattvas and can be construed as transcendental and creative (F4+). The middle three all derive from the ego-principle, but are themselves ranked by their order and links to the guṇas. Their shared origin sets the core triad apart from both the first and the fifth pentad, and the latter, derived from the fourth, is removed from the first by one additional step. But the collective labels for the second and third pentads, buddhīndriyas and karmendriyas, derive from buddhi

19 Dasgupta 1922: 242, 244.
21 Thus manas not only fills out the first pentad but also, taken with the second and third pentad, constitutes ‘the group of eleven’ (tattvas 5–15). Note too that the derivatives of the ego-principle are structured as 1+4, i.e. manas plus four pentads.
22 Manu (2.89–92), claiming to present the eleven in their proper traditional order, roughly reverses the order in his karmendriya list, which moves from anus to ear.
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(same root as in the ‘Buddha’), and karma, ‘action’ (from kr, ‘make, do’). So these pentads fall under F1 (wisdom) and F2 (dynamism). Just as the immaterial puruṣa outranks the partly material prakṛti, so the subtle elements outrank the more material gross elements, even if the devaluation is positional and implicit rather than overt.

Admittedly, the subtle elements (tanmātras, ‘only that much, rudimentary’) are not clearly linked to the definition of F3. Their position in the hierarchy is the one so often associated with fecundity and wealth, but here any such association is indirect (via the guṇas) or absent. Nevertheless it is reasonable to construe the upper-level pentad as reflecting the pentadic ideology. The ideology provided the framework within which those who devised Sāṃkhya operated creatively. The argument must be looked at as a whole; one cannot expect every manifestation of the ideology to conform perfectly to the model.

At the lower level we shall now concentrate on the fifth pentad: space, wind, fire, water, earth. The list corresponds reasonably well to the second and fourth: space to hearing and sound, wind to feeling and touch, fire (providing light) to seeing and form, water to tasting and taste, earth to smell. The ordering of the elements is the standard Indian one, already found in the Upaniṣads. ‘From ātman (arose) space, from space air, from air . . .’ (TaitU 2.1); but after earth the list continues with plants, food and man. Elsewhere (ŚvU 2.12, 6.2), the standard order is reversed, but the pentad appears as an isolated whole.

Let us follow the standard order. Ākāśa means ‘space, ether, sky’, and in philosophy ‘the subtle and ethereal fluid supposed to pervade the universe and to be the peculiar vehicle of life and sound’. Wind – air in motion – is akin to breath. Fire covers the sun as well as fires maintained by humans; within the list it is anomalous in normally requiring fuel. Water of course includes rain. Earth (pṛthvī), feminine as a noun and female as a goddess, can be related within its pentad to ākāśa taken as sky, but within the whole schema it relates to puruṣa, the first tattva; very roughly, the list views the cosmos from above downwards, but other hints of hierarchy appear in the trend from whole to part, abstract and rarefied to concrete, and male to female. More precisely, the two extremes stand apart from the core, again illustrating the one-three-one pattern. In a geocentric universe earth is static, and space has nowhere to go, while the intervening triad are all mobile: they blow, spread or rise, and flow.

It has long been known23 that the Greeks recognised the same list of elements but reversed the standard order of the second and third: ether, fire, air, water, earth. The one-three-one pattern seems to be present in the cosmogony of the sixth-century Pherecydes:24 Zeus, Khronos and Khthoniē (Earth) are primal,

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23 E.g. Deussen 1999: 189.
and from his seed Khronos made fire, wind and water. There follows a distribution among five cosmic nooks (mukhos, ‘recess’).

In any case, the Greek sequence accords precisely with pentadic theory. Ether, like ākāśa, pertains to totality (F4+). Fire is central to sacrifice in Greece – consider its place in Hesiod’s origin myth (Theogony 535ff.) – no less than in India, where Agni is sometimes the priest of the gods; and in a cosmic context its place in religion (F1) outranks its role in domestic human nourishment (which would imply F3). Wind exerts force (F2), especially in storms. Water is essential for the flourishing and fecundity of humans, but no less for that of agricultural plants and animals – the source of wealth (F3). Earth here falls under F4- by virtue of its position, but no doubt for other reasons too, such as its acceptance of polluting corpses; in other contexts its fertility may place it under F3.

In his comparison of Greek and Indian philosophy McEvilley explores the elements but neglects the possibility of common origin. In criticising this neglect, I presented a fuller account of the relation between elements and functions, including some evidence from Zoroastrianism. However, I hope enough has been said here to render it plausible that, despite the minor difference in standard order, both Indian and Greek lists manifest the pentadic ideology.

It would be interesting to explore the correlations between elements and senses, but all I can offer here is a note on the rank of the ‘transcendent’ sense and its relation to the orality that for so long dominated these early cultures. Most Hindu traditions allot ultimate philosophical authority to the Vedas, and the Vedas are śruti (‘hearing, ear, sound’ – the texts were originally ‘heard’ by sages). Among the many meanings of brahman are ‘pious effusion or utterance, prayer, the Veda’, but ‘the most sacred sound in the whole Veda’ is the often-used monosyllable om, which can even stand for brahman. Compare the Pythagorean notion of the harmony or music of the spheres; but also the akousmata (from akouō, ‘hear’), the curt oral maxims so significant to the movement that they served to label one of its subgroups (the akousmatikoi).

The elements provide one clear bridge between Sāṃkhya and early Greek philosophy, but it is not the only one. Among the lesser-known texts of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss (whose first academic post was as a Sanskritist) is his 1911 article ‘Anna-Virāj’. Virāj, often linked with food (anna), is a

26 Allen 2005b. I take the opportunity to amplify a remark on p. 66 of the article. Many Pre-Socratics proposed an archē, a ‘basic source or principle of all things’ (Graham 2010: 18). Thales favoured water, Anaximenes air, Heracleitus fire; and Anaximander’s apeiron (‘the boundless or infinite’) corresponds to F4+. According to Aristotle, no philosophers regarded earth as an archē, but Xenophanes may perhaps have done so (Graham 2010: 117, 131).
The common origin approach

Cosmogonic figure, sometimes male, sometimes female. Presented in *Ṛgveda* 10.90.5 as both the child and the parent of Puruṣa, Virāj was seen by Renou as the female principle, ‘a sort of primitive Śakti’, and her sex is also noted by Jamison and Brereton. But Virāj is also the name of a metre characterised by verses of ten syllables (5+5); and as an adjective *virāj* (from *rāj*, ‘reign’) means ‘ruling far and wide, sovereign’. In seeking to link these various attributes Mauss cites *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (4.3.8), which identifies the metre with the highest throw in dice, namely ten (presented as 5+5). As he notes, and as is well known, the names for the throws of the four-sided dice are the same as the names of the yugas, the four eras of cosmic time; the throws 4, 3, 2, 1 form a series of decreasing value, as do the homonymous eras. At first sight we are dealing with quartets. But Mauss suggests that some forms of dicing allowed a winner-takes-all score of 1+2+3+4 = 10. In other words, via the dice, he is connecting a cosmogonic female with arithmetic or numerology, and at the same time recognising a fifth entity that is totalising and transcendent. As we noted, the very name ‘Sāṃkhya’ points to numerology, and clearly ‘Anna-Virāj’ deals with Sāṃkhya-like ideas.

In Greece the combination of numerology, ontology and soteriology points us to Pythagoras and his tradition (the attribution of mathematical thinking to the sixth-century founder can be doubted). The Pythagorean tradition greatly valued the tetractys, a name for the sum of the first four numbers. Regarding it as the kernel or epitome of reason, the adherents referred to it in their most solemn oath, and presented it visually as a triangular array of ten pebbles (the ‘perfect triangle’); one pebble at the top, then two, then three, with four in the bottom row. They also used the pentagram or five-pointed star; and pentagons, which can be made by joining the points of the star, form the surfaces of only one among the five regular solids, namely the dodecahedron, which was said to symbolise ‘the sphere of the all’ (Plato *Tim.* 55c). Whether or not the Pythagoreans connected these various manifestations of fiveness, I suppose that in all cases the number somehow related to the old ideology.

On the other hand, pentadic theory is only superficially about five (or ten) being a sacred number among Indo-European speakers. Basically it is about the manifestation of an ideology having five compartments, and provided each compartment has only one representative (which is not always the case), five will appear as specially favoured. No doubt various natural factors have contributed to the picture – the five (or ten) digits, the number of readily distinguishable senses, the five true planets then known, the fact that an individual has a back,

30 Jamison and Brereton 2014: 1538.
front and two sides. But such factors can hardly have given rise to the ideology, which is more likely to have originated in a society having five clans.  

In practice, ‘fours’ are often more salient than ‘fives’. India has four varṇas, Vedas, yugas, puruṣārthas (values); Greece often lists only four elements, and the term ‘tetractys’ alludes to four, not five. Influenced by such facts, certain comparativists have seen quintessences and the like, not as representing an F4+, but (often) as in a sense secondary, as a superadded summary.  

An Africanist anthropologist, van Binsbergen (2012), perceives rightly that study of the elements must one day go beyond Indo-Europeans (and the relatively well-known Chinese five-element theory), and particularly attacks Eurocentric emphasis on Empedocles’ recognition of four elements. Certainly fours are prominent. However, those who look for representatives of F4+ will often find them. When Empedocles referred to his quartet as rhizōmata (‘roots’), he, and his predecessors, were surely aware that roots spread out from a central trunk or stem.

**Concluding observations**

The otherworld journeys and the pentadic sets exemplify different aspects of the ideological tradition shared by Indian and Greek philosophers, but they do not represent any deep-lying divide within the Indo-European heritage. The journey stories often manifest pentadic patterns, in whole or part: as we saw, the transitional locations correlate with at least three of the five senses, and among the five worlds that the soul traverses before reaching Brahmā’s, three are linked with the mobile elements. The tenth and final location is characterised with a compound of a-mita, literally ‘not measured’; compare the arkhē of Anaximander, whose a-peiron is literally ‘what lacks an end’. The evolutionism implicit in the Sāṃkhya schema gives it a narrative quality comparable to that of the genealogies in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (and in certain passages of the Sanskrit epic).

The chapter has argued that comparisons of Indian and Greek philosophy need to recognise the importance of the Indo-European cultural heritage that they share, but this does not imply rejection of other historical approaches. Greek contacts with West Asia (especially Iran), as favoured by Martin West, must be relevant to certain topics such as astrology. As for Richard Seaford’s interest in urbanisation and monetisation, it is *a priori* implausible that such massive social changes had zero impact on philosophising. In the language of biological anthropology, whereas Seaford pursues homoplasy (similarities arising from similar

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33 Allen 2012.


35 But he ranges so boldly across continents and ages that, as he recognises, few are likely to follow his theories.
selection pressures), pentadic theory pursues homology (similarities resulting from common origin); and like the biologists, we need both. I only claim that those thinkers who innovated did so within, or at least in the light of, the pentadic ideology, in whatever forms it had reached them.