

Commentary

A metaphysics of living systems: the *Yōga-Vāsiṣṭha* view*

The *Yōga-Vāsiṣṭha* is a rich and complex philosophical ‘poem’ (*kāvya*) of epic length, written in classical Sanskrit by an unknown author some time between the 6th and 13th centuries CE, probably around the 7th century. It is notable for its eloquent praise of self-effort and enquiry or analysis, and for its severe disparagement of the notion of fate. It views consciousness as (a) characterizing all living forms (including plant and insect life), (b) being atomic, and (c) analogous to the emergence of waves and whirlpools in water; it therefore grapples with what today would be called the problems of reductionism and emergentism. Notions of the survival of the fittest, and of a dynamic process of creation and loss, are expressed with characteristic force. The paper presents a selection of verses (in an English translation) setting forth these views, and a brief analysis of their implications.

1. Introduction

My purpose here is to present a set of verses from the complex and very rich work known as the *Yōga-Vāsiṣṭha* (= Vasiṣṭha’s *Yōga*; Śāstrī Paṇṣīkar 1981). This work appears to represent a philosophy that I believe working scientists of today can live with, and perhaps even live by.

As is so often the case with Indian works of this kind, it is difficult to identify the author or date of the *Yōga-Vāsiṣṭha* with confidence. It has been formally attributed to Vālmīki, the author of the famous epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, and purports to be his account of a series of public conversations between the nearly 16-year old Prince Rāma and the celebrated *guru* of his royal family, Vasiṣṭha. It is however hard to believe that the true author of the book (longer than the *Rāmāyaṇa*, by the way) is Vālmīki. Scholars consider that the work must have been written some time between the 6th and 13th centuries; Athreya (1993) has presented some persuasive arguments that the work was written around the 6th or 7th century CE – i.e. around the same time as or slightly earlier than Śaṅkara.

The *Vāsiṣṭha* is basically a long philosophical poem, written in simple, classical, lovely Sanskrit. One of the most striking features of the philosophy underlying the work is its praise of *vicāra* (enquiry, analysis) and *pauruṣa* (human effort), and its disparagement of the notion of *daiva* (fate). Indeed the *Vāsiṣṭha*, whose ideal is *jīvan-mukti*, i.e. liberation while living (or *living free*, so to speak), takes the view that even a man of affairs may attain liberation. This view leads to much debate in Vidyāraṇya’s famous work (13th c.) *Jīvan-mukti-vivēka* (Mokṣadānanda 1996), with the *guru* being persistently asked by his disciple whether Vasiṣṭha is not guilty of *vyavahāra-prāsamsā* (= praise of worldly involvement). The *guru* denies this, but I get the impression that the debate ends lamely, on an inconclusive note.

The eloquent advocacy of the overriding importance of human effort in the *Vāsiṣṭha* modulates an otherwise generally *advaitic* view: the book seems to champion a ‘soft’ *advaita*. A discussion of these points is available in a separate work of the author (Narasimha 2000). And a fascinating account of the *Vāsiṣṭha* view of reality and illusion is given by O’Flaherty (1984).

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2. General *Vāsiṣṭha* attitudes

Vasiṣṭha would have approved of the opening line of Timothy Williamson's recent book (Williamson 2000): 'Knowledge and action are the central relations between mind and world'. Barely has the *Vāsiṣṭha* got past the invocatory stanzas when Sutīkṣṇa demands from the sage Agasti unambiguous instruction about the path to liberation; and the answer he immediately gets – stated in the seventh verse of the book – is this*:

It takes both of its wings for a bird
To fly about in the sky –
So it takes both knowing and doing
For man to perfect himself.

(1:1.7)

Although the author of the *Vāsiṣṭha* repeatedly decries the notion of fate (Narasimha 2000), he seems to recognize that there are certain immutable laws (*niyati*), as in the following verse.

He may know much, he may know all,
He may be Mādhava, or Hara himself,
Or whoever: but he is powerless
To deflect the course of the Law.

(5:81.26)

Creation is not something which occurs on a certain day, not even something that might be attributed to God; it is a continuing, dynamic process:

The riches of creation, like sparks from a fire,
Arrive, depart, ascend or fall
In that pure and unified space
That is without beginning or middle;
I don't think the cause
Is what is called God.

(6u:116.27)

Philosophically, therefore, for the *Vāsiṣṭha* creationism is not an option, and absolute laws are not necessarily rejected.

3. Life

One aspect of the *Vāsiṣṭha* view of life seems related to the view of a nature that is 'red in tooth and claw'; for example this is what Vasiṣṭha tells Rāma :

All creatures in this jungle of life
Are plucked – and destroyed –
Continually; and, in delusion, feed
On each other's muck – and defend their feed.

(5:14.28)

In general, the author appears to be a realist in matters of this kind (including war and peace). His eloquent advocacy of self-effort, discipline, analysis and good cheer, and his categorical assertion that liberation (*mōkṣa*) can come only from both knowledge and action, appear to arise from a hard-headed appreciation of the true nature of the world, not from a soft or romantic view. However the book is also lyrical at many places about the beauty of nature, of young married love etc. Indeed its

*Here and in the sequel, references accompanying each verse are given in the form 'book:canto.verse'; 6p and 6u refer to the *pūrvā-ardha* (earlier half) and *uttara-ardha* (later half) of the sixth book.

view of the human body is characteristically appealing (especially because it is such a contrast to the aversion that is so often expressed in much other Indian philosophical writing):

That great city known as one's body
Should be a source of joy, not misery;
To a wise man it's like a garden
That gives him pleasure as it sets him free.
(4:23.2)

In fact, Rāma is urged to be (simultaneously) a great doer, a great enjoyer and a great renouncer (*mahā - kartā, mahā - bhōktā, mahā - tyāgī bhava.anagha*, 6p:115.1), albeit that these words are invested with meanings somewhat beyond what would ordinarily be attached to them.

4. Atomism

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the work, from the point of view of the present discussion, is the way it grapples with what today would be called reductionism and emergentism – currently matters of much vigorous debate.

The author seems convinced that the universe is made of atoms (= *aṇus* and *parama - aṇus*), which appear and reappear constantly in the dialogue between Rāma and Vasiṣṭha. But he sees them as mental constructs as well:

Of the billions of atoms that make up
This universe, each and every one
Is seen as an internal world
By the detached philosopher.
(2:18.27)

He is thus certainly not critical of atomism (as Śaṅkara was), but does not see the world as a mere collection of atoms (6u:103.65), especially if atoms are inert (*jaḍ ās.tē parama - aṇavah*, 6u:103.68). Nevertheless these atoms are also seen as an essential part of a living system:

That atom, with memory endowed,
Is what is called *jīva* [live];
At end of life it stays to reside
In the space of the body that's dead.
(3:55.6)

Thus it appears as if the *Vasiṣṭha* embraces an atomistic view of the world, but considers that some additional element (*vāsanā*) is needed for life. The immediate question that arises is how this atomistic view is related to its conceptions of mind and consciousness.

First the mind, which is seen as central to all our perceptions. The following verse is typical of the author's view of the connection between mind and world:

Understand, Rāghava, that the mind
Is the grand hub around which whirls –
Maddeningly – that magical wheel
Which is this world we see.
(5:50.6)

Shades of *māyā* here, of course; that is a word that does keep cropping up, although it does not dominate the debate. But the connection with the atom is that its 'structure', if we may use that word, is also a construct of the mind. Indeed,

Wherever rests the inconceivable
Spirit of the beholder's mind,
There – even in the belly of an atom –
Rises up a splendour of perception.
(3:1.27)

This is only a forceful extension of the author's view (widely shared in Indian philosophies) that everything that is seen is in the seer:

Like the essence in the substance,
 Like the fragrance in the flower,
 Like the oil in the seed – so the idea
 Of what is seen is in the seer.
 (3:1.43)

And the mind, and its behaviour, are complex and rich:

As water displays itself richly
 In current, wave, foam and spray,
 So does the mind exhibit
 A strange, splendid diversity.
 (3:110.48)

(This is incidentally one of the many interesting fluid-flow metaphors in the book: one personal reason for its attraction to a fluid dynamicist like me.) Here is a hint of what is called 'emergentism', i.e. the notion that *structures* may emerge 'spontaneously' in a system without the intervention of an external agency: the water of course is only inert atoms, but out of it emerge a great variety of such striking phenomena as wave and foam and vortex*.

5. Consciousness

Let us briefly consider the book's view of consciousness, which is seen as characterizing all life, including insects, trees etc. (6p:10.23). Consciousness is of course central to its philosophical discourse, and references to it are so numerous throughout the book that an attempt to summarize all of them in a short essay would be hopeless. In general, much of this would not be unfamiliar to followers of advaitic philosophy, so I shall confine myself here to quoting below a few verses that capture what appear to me to be somewhat unusual views, and ones that may resonate with a scientific view of the world.

In the first place the physical world, the mind and consciousness are declared to be different spaces:

Gracious lady, please understand:
 There is physical space, there's mental space,
 And, more tenuous than either of them,
 There is the third space of consciousness.
 (3:17.10)

Consistent with the author's atomism, this 'space' of consciousness is also seen in atomic terms (reductionism again):

Within the atoms of consciousness lie
 Particles of *all* experience,
 Even as in taste of honey lie
 All riches of flower, fruit and leaf.
 (3:81.35)

Particles of all experience: it is almost as if the author was saying that experience could be quantized, digitally stored. If he were here with us today, he might be talking about (if I may invent the word) 'cognons'.

*As Gell-Mann has described it, the doctrine of emergentism is that 'we do not need *something else* in order to get *something else*' (Horgan 1996) and he added, interestingly, 'there are lots and lots of eddies in that process' which leads to 'many violations of that tendency' of the universe to wind down thermodynamically.

6. Emergentism?

How then do we explain the relation of the universe to this atomistic consciousness? The answer is suggested through analogies:

The universe rests pervasively
 In the space of consciousness,
 Like emptiness in sky, gust in wind,
 And like fluidity in water.
 (6u:103.73)

The author is again getting very close here to emergent phenomena, and it appears as if he would be very comfortable with this notion, as this verse indicates:

The space of consciousness doesn't differ
 From the universe at any time;
 The two are like gales and wind –
 Two forms of the self-same thing.
 (6u:103.77)

Indeed, he suggests that consciousness and apparent understanding appear 'spontaneously' – by their own nature – the same way that eddies appear in fluid motion:

From it arises, by itself,
 A form of some understanding
 Just as the streak of a whirlpool does
 From the fluid throb of water.
 (6p:9.3)

There is only consciousness, and what we see are merely its vibrations:

The sole stuff of the whole universe
 Is consciousness – as water is of the seas;
 And it vibrates through the intellect
 As water pounds through ocean-waves.
 (6p:101.54)

Whirlpools, eddies, gusts in wind: these are recurring metaphors throughout the book, as the author speaks of the beauty of vortices (*salil'-āvarta-sundarī*, 4:47.41) and the inherent restlessness of wind (*spand'.aika-dharmavān vātō*, 4:36.21). It is hard to avoid the impression that these phenomena – so easily visible to the naked eye, so accessible to common everyday experience – fascinated the author, precisely because he had to connect them with his belief in the atomistic nature of the universe.

And he finally offers us his own version of an astonishing hypothesis (with apologies to Crick 1994):

The inert is not in any way
 Distinct from the intelligent;
 There is essentially no difference
 Between all of creation, all that exists.
 (3:55.57)

7. Conclusion

This discussion has been very brief; its purpose is to provide the reader with a glimpse of a view of life and nature that, in the large, recognizes that they may often be harsh, but that advocates hard work, action, self-control and discipline, and an overall sense of joy and good cheer, because the notion of fate is absurd, and the past can be defeated. There is also a commitment to atomism, in that

life is seen as made up of atoms – but possibly endowed with memory or some special ingredient. But out of these atoms arise complex phenomena, like eddy, wave, foam and spray on water; and the author of the *Yōga-Vāsiṣṭha* would not at all be disturbed by the notion that consciousness emerges in some similar way from those atoms, without being forced by anything beyond them.

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