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From a Magical Formula to a Universal Being?
An Outline of the History of the Sanskrit Term *Bráhman*

ABSTRACT

The term *bráhman* is one of the most well-known words in the West that originate from Indian philosophy and religion. But before its 'career' as a name for the Absolute in the classical period, the term stood at the centre of Vedic religion and metaphysics. A short glance at its usage and meanings in the early periods may be of great advantage to the understanding of classical Indian metaphysics, not to mention the Vedic outlook. Many Western scholars delivered theories concerning the meanings of the term and their changes in time. The most popular theory among them seems to be the concept expounded first by Griswold – the evolution the term *bráhman* underwent from the earliest appearances in the Vedic texts (the *saṃhitās*), through ritual manuals (the *brāhmaṇas*) up to the philosophical speculations of the Upaniṣads, shaping the frames for later classical philosophy. In this article I intend to recall the basic points of Griswold's theory, that is:

• *bráhman* as a ritualistic formula, a hymn or 'prayer,' as some translate; an utterance with a special religious power used in sacrifices (mostly in the Ṛgveda),

• *bráhman* as a magical formula, a spell; an utterance with magical power, capable of changing worldly states (in the Atharvaveda),

• *bráhman* as the aforementioned power itself, contained in utterances as a causative factor (in the Brāhmaṇas),

• *bráhman* as the magical/spiritual power, seen as pervading the whole universe, especially particular utterances and those who know their meaning (in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads),

• *bráhman* as the power of life and existence, underlying all beings – the substratum of the world, its inner centre or 'soul' (in the Upaniṣads),

• *brahman* as the Absolute, all that truly exists (in the Upaniṣads).

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It is possible that the distinctions between the usages of the term brahman listed above are more projections of a Western mind than actual differences as the original users would see them. The list, therefore, should be taken as a working hypothesis only, to be proved (or refuted) by analysing the source texts of the Vedic culture. For the texts is all we have.

KEY WORDS

brahman, Vedas, Upanishads, Indian Philosophy

The concept of evolution of the term *bráhman*, or the notion of brahman – from a kind of ritualistic utterance, through a power, mystical or magical, to the universal being of the Upaniṣads – is probably well known to the most indologists, at least in its main points. This is not only because of the work of Griswold,[1] edited in year 1900, devoted to the brahman in all its occurrences in the philosophy of India. Sanskrit dictionaries alone provide sufficient coverage, as they list all the meanings attributed to brahman by Griswold. This evolutionary understanding of the term brahman is the most widespread among the Western scholars, and though not the only one, is probably the most commonly accepted. It has even entered normal academic teaching, just as it is in my Institute and in my classes of Indian philosophy. Yet I am not sure if everyone who follows this way of thinking is indeed referring directly to the original Griswold version. It is, after all, more than a hundred years old. In the history of Western indology it is a whole epoch. That is why I find it useful to adduce it in more detail in this article and, perhaps, share some reflections and problems of interpretation I personally have with it.

The first of the supposed meanings of *bráhman* is to be an utterance, a peculiar piece of speech – a hymn or a verse of a hymn, a prayer, a ritualistic formula, etc. – there are many terms used here by scholars and translators. Griswold himself chooses 'prayer' and 'hymn' as words best fitting this use of the word *bráhman*.

Numerous instances from the RV show the word *bráhman* in the contexts that make it possible to render it as a name for some kind of a ritualistic utterance. Griswold wants it to be a 'general synonym' for words like *stoma*, *uktha*, *dhī*, *manman*, *gir*, *manīṣa*, etc. – all designating some kind of a religious or ritualistic utterance, hymn, incantation or song. The first ar-

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[1] H. DeWitt Griswold, *Brahman: A Study in the History of Indian Philosophy*, New York 1900.

gument for him is the fact that the word brahman coexists with these other names for an utterance in many R̥gvedic hymns. He cites a couple of verses illustrating this coexistence as a way of enumerating, for example "stóme bráhmaṇi śasyámāna ukthé" in RV 6.23.1. or "bráhma gira ukthâ ca manma" in RV 6.38.4.

Another way of using the word brahman as a name for a ritualistic utterance, as Griswold finds in the R̥gveda, is as a way of concluding or summarising a hymn. As he explains it, these occurrences are "in such a way as clearly to refer to the preceding verses, i.e., to the whole hymn." Let me provide but one of his examples – the last verse of RV 1.62. (in the Griffith's translation):

O mighty Indra, Gotama's son Nodhas hath fashioned this new prayer (*návyam átakṣad bráhma*) to thee Eternal,

Sure leader, yoker of the Tawny Coursers. May he, enriched with prayer, come soon and early.

The above example shows also another point of Griswold's analysis – the epithet 'new' to describe brahman. It is to show, together with some limiting pronouns also describing brahman in R̥gvedic verses (*this brahman*; *my brahman*, etc.), that brahman here is understood as a real, peculiar piece of speech, uttered here and now by a man performing a ritual. I would say this point of Griswold's listings is the most convincing with regard to brahman understood as a special utterance. The use of demonstrative and personal pronouns – as well as the plural forms, also mentioned by Griswold – is indeed a very clear argument for understanding brahman as some individual, real entity – be it sonic (consisting of sounds) or verbal (consisting of words, i.e. sounds conveying meaning); this final distinction I will consider later. And if we agree that this use of the word was primary, we can also agree that the supposed evolution unfolded from individual to abstract meanings.

 In all these fragments cited by Griswold, brahman (or *brahmāni*, in plural) is something that is offered to gods, together with oblations and eulogies. It is something that should please the gods and strengthen or reinforce them. Sometimes the word brahman is the object of verbs 'to sing' or 'to hear' – it is sung by Brahmins and is to be heard by gods.

This concept of brahman as a kind of a ritualistic/religious utterance is supported also by claims that it was fashioned or formed by the poets. The verb used in this context (seen for example in the verse cited before) is *takṣ* – to form (primary by cutting, like to cut wood, or to cut a cart out of wood,[2])

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[2] I am very grateful to prof. Joanna Jurewicz from Warsaw University for calling my attention to the R̥gvedic uses of the verb *takṣ*.

to fashion, to create, to prepare. The same verb appears with words for other ritualistic utterances – *stoma*, *uktha* or *vāc*. The poets (*ṛṣis*) form (*takṣanti*) the brahman that is to be used later in a ritual. This 'forming' could be understood in two ways – that they compose the verses – they fashion sentences from the verbal material, arrange words into verses; or that they just utter them – using the sounds as a material, they emit ordered arrays of syllables. The most probable is that both the ideas – arranging words and producing arranged sounds – may come together here for, as is well known and will be repeated in this article consistently, the sonic character of the speech is primary and the most important for Indian metaphysics.

It can be also said in a more general way: as with all the instruments and ingredients of a Vedic ritual, speech needs to be prepared, purified, perfected, to fit the ritual needs. There arises, of course, an instant association with a general Indian view on grammar – linguistic units have to be prepared, too, before they can serve as communication – prepared or purified by the rules of grammar. The standard Indian comparison of ritual and language – present mostly in the *vyākaraṇa* and *mīmāṃsā* schools – is based on this very idea, just as ordinary, material things have to be purified before they can be used in rituals, in the same way units of speech have to be purified by a proper application of grammatical endings and rules before they can be used in a sentence as words. One may think here that if it is so, then the speech elements of the ritual require double preparation: firstly, in its aspect of speech, a purification by the grammatical rules and secondly, as a ritual element, a ritual purification. That is why ritual utterances have their own names – they are indeed special kinds of speech.

But leaving this aside now, and coming back to the main line of thought concerning the origination of brahman – besides the poetical records regarding its formation, there are also fragments in the RV that suggest brahman's divine origin. It is *devadatta* or *devahita* – given or granted by a god. The gods are asked for the granting, revealing, or sharpening of brahman. And again – analogical phrases speak of hymns and ritual songs in the same way. Thus, the poets ask for divine inspiration, which is of course an indispensable fact if we remember that the Vedic verses are heard – *śruti* – and not created by humans. The Vedic speech – as an independent, extra-human entity and often (in Vedic and brahminical cosmogonies) the first being, a pattern for the material world – is the most important and the most effective medium between the human and the divine world. It is a tool that embodies the power of creation, which is why it is also the most desired. There would be no ritual without correct speech; thus, there would be no world without it.

Because, as the metaphysical speculations of the Brāhmaṇas point out, there is no world without ritual.

The connection of speech with creation – which is also the connection of knowledge with power – forms the basis for the effectiveness of the ritual utterances. This connection makes the verses uttered in a ritual a powerful tool or means of activity that can influence the gods, the people, and the world. The emphasis on the proper pronunciation and accentuation of the ritual sounds, repeatedly shown in the texts of Brāhmaṇas, is a sign of this close connection between words and effect. We can find many stories that illustrate the importance of proper speech. Let me adduce one only, the well-known story of Indraśatru,[3] a fiery creature summoned ritually by the god Tvaṣṭṛ in anger, and thus with a wrong emphasis placed on his name. As a consequence of this mistake, the summoned demon became 'the one who has Indra as his slayer' (*índraśatru*) instead of 'Indra's slayer' (*indraśátru*), and Tvaṣṭṛ's intention to get rid of the god Indra remained unrealised.

The same idea seems to be the base for the magical use of words. The source of the oldest magical thinking in India is – according to the vast majority of, if not all, scholars – the Atharvaveda. As a marginal note I would like to admit here that I personally have a problem with defining magic and magical activities in the Vedic texts. Are we right to distinguish ritual, religious practices from magical ones? In both cases we have a special use of language, founded on the knowledge of relations within the universe. The knowledge that is hidden or sacred, but not supernatural; for it concerns the very nature of the universe. Nowadays scholars more and more often verbalise similar doubts concerning the idea of magic[4] – and in this light discriminating Ṛgveda and Atharvaveda as containing material of a different kind is not so obvious as it might have seemed decades ago. But for the purposes of this article, which deals with a work published more than a hundred years ago, we can leave this question aside. Let us then accept the working hypothesis that Atharvaveda is more 'magical' than 'religious,' without deliberating the exact meaning of these descriptions.

What is certain is that AV contains numerous spells and magical formulas that are said to have some concrete, practical applications – their power enables the utterer to achieve his goals, whatever they may be – we find

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[3] The story can be found in ŚB 1.6.3. and TB 2.4.12.

[4] A very clear description of this shift in modern interpretations is given for example by P. E. Burchett in *The 'Magical' Language of Mantra*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" 2008, Vol. 76 (4), p. 807–843.

love spells, healing spells, spells that destroy enemies, encourage richness and prosperity, that bring the flourishing of crops and the nourishment of cattle – anything important in everyday life. And here we also meet the word *bráhman* as a name for the verses or sentences that have the magical power. The magical spells are called *bráhman*, just as in the RV the ritual verses are called *bráhman*. Or, at least, we can say that the term *bráhman* appears in similar – analogical – contexts in the two Vedas, the contexts that allow us to see the brahman as something very closely connected with special kinds of speech. There are repetitive phrases in the AV saying that with a brahman this or that goal was attained, phrases similar in their structure to the phrases from RV, saying that with a brahman the gods are pleased or invigorated – which means also that some goals of a ritual were attained.

So, if we agree that *bráhman* can stand for a kind of a ritual utterance, and if we combine it with the Atharvavedan instances of *bráhman* as a magical formula or a spell, to join it together into one more general understanding of brahman as a word, sentence or phrase, that possesses or displays or grants the power to create or change the states of the world – then we can proceed to an alternative meaning, or a change in the meaning of the term: this very power itself, the power contained in or characterising the powerful verses. Griswold recognises, in fact, three levels of this – supposed – Vedic understanding of the term *bráhman*: firstly, the external – an utterance in its verbal form; secondly, the internal – the meaning of the utterance, the knowledge laying behind the words, which he identifies with *tapas*; and thirdly the abstract one[5] – the power 'which resides in the heart of the sacred word,' as he puts it.

I would say that this tripartite distinction comes from the misunderstanding or lack of the strong connection, or even identification, of words and their meanings that can be traced in the Vedic and later classical, grammatical conceptions of speech. There is a very strong idea in Indian thought that the language matches the reality completely – that the order seen in the language (which is called grammar) is in fact the same order that is seen in the extralingusitic rest of the world, the material sphere (the order in the classical period is called *dharma*). The philosophy of Bhartṛhari – the Grammarian – would be the best example here. This is a monistic view that sees speech, *vāc*, as the principle governing and creating the manifold world of the material. In this kind of view the form and the content – that is, the words and the meanings (*definiens* and *definiendum*) – are in fact one. The apparent difference between them is the dif-

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[5] Griswold does not use the word 'abstract' here, in fact he does not name this level at all; this is just my attempt to understand his notions.

ference of aspect, or a mode of being, not the difference of ontologically distinct entities. If we believe Bhartr̥hari that his view is but an extension, or reformulation of the Vedic understanding of speech and the world, without changing the basics of it, then we can assume that the difference between the form and the content in the case of the Vedic utterances is only the superficial difference of a mode, not of a being. In this case differentiating between the form and the meaning of an utterance is just a Western projection.

Of course we could investigate deeper the question of whether the power of brahman is connected more with the form or with the meaning of words. The question in fact stands in the centre of brahminical speculations. We could say that it is a source or a motive of the whole philosophy of the Vedic Brāhmaṇas. That is the philosophy which seeks connections, the relations themselves (*bandhu*); the relations between the ritual, the human and the universe.[6] Here the double nature of language – the conjunction of ordered sounds and conveying ordered meanings – is a clue or a signpost, showing the right way of thinking. As I previously mentioned, the structure of language fits the structure of the world. One step earlier in this thinking is that the structure of sounds and the structure of meanings combine together, fit mutually or, as seen metaphysically, are unified.

So the sounds engaged in the ritual – sounds arranged in the fixed order of verses – are the direct instrument of the ritual. But words convey meanings, and these meanings, even if first only indirectly important in ritual verses (as for example Fritz Staal persuasively suggested[7]), become the subject of theoretical speculations of the brahminical ritualists. For it is the meanings that allow for seeking more deep and more vast metaphysical structures, connections between the spheres of the universe. The meanings, be them primary or derived, themselves refer to the relations, or at least suggest their existence.[8] That is why the quest of the Brāhmaṇas – the quest of finding the basic structure of the world – is carried on in the language itself. The language is the key and the answer to the basic questions.

The power contained in the ritual verses, making them effective, is then the power of relations, which connects sounds with activities and things of

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[6] As for the question of Brāhmaṇas and their philosophy, still the best description is S. Schayer's *Die Weltanschauung der Brāhmaṇa-Texte*, "Rocznik Orientalistyczny" 1925, II, p. 26–32 – such a little marginal annotation in topic of the old texts.

[7] F. Staal, *Ritual and Mantras: Rules Without Meaning*, Delhi 1996.

[8] A very interesting and informative contribution to the notions of language as a sign of reality can be found in J. Bronkhorst, *Etymology and Magic: Yāska's Nirukta, Plato's Cratylus, and the Riddle of Semantic Etymologies*, "Numen" 2001, Vol. 48, Fasc. 2, p. 147–203.

the world. So if the nature of language and the nature of the universe are parallel (or identical) – the power that makes sounds effective must be the same power that makes anything else effective. And thus the question of brahman – the power of the utterance – becomes the question of brahman – the universal power. The Brāhmaṇas identify brahman with several important and influent beings or aspects of the world. Brahman is the speech (*vāg vai brahman*), the truth (*satya*), the cosmic order (*ṛta*), the *akṣara* (a syllable, or sound, or the unmoving one), the firstborn (*prathamaja*), that from which everything is born or evolved, the primary power, the highest being, the first god – Prājapati or Brahmanaspati, the creator god. It is also *svayam-bhū* – self-existent, independent. Everything else depends on it. And, as the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads constantly repeat – the knowledge of this gives power over it. By knowing the relations between the spheres, the various identifications of brahman, one can control and rule them.

The continuation of this quest for knowledge and for a proper identification of the universal relations can be found in the Upaniṣads. Beside the most famous Upaniṣadic *māha-vākyas*, sentences equating brahman with the self (*āt-man*), the world (*jagat*), or just with "this" (*ayam*), with "me" (*aham*) or "you" (*tvam*), we find in the Upaniṣads long lists of partial or provisional identifications of brahman with the important and influent phenomena of the world. Thus the brahman is understood as (this list comes from the Ch.Up. 7.1.1.–7.23.1.): name (*nāma*), speech (*vāc*), mind (*manas*), intention (*saṃkalpa*), thought (*cit-ta*), meditation (*dhyāna*), understanding (*vijñāna*), strength (*bala*), food (*anna*), water (*apas*), heat (*tejas*), space (*ākāśa*), memory (*smara*), hope (*āśā*), breath of life (*prāṇa*), truth (*satya*), reliance (*śraddhā*), firmness (*niṣṭhā*), activity (*kṛti*), pleasure (*sukha*) and abundance (*bhūman*). Or (from Tait.Up. 3.1.): food (*anna*), breath (*prāṇa*), sight (*cakṣus*), hearing (*śrotra*), mind (*manas*), speech (*vāc*), and finally bliss (*ānanda*). All these identifications come from the wish to reach the primary source and power of existence. For, as the Taittiriya Upanishad states,

> [...] the one who knows what stays unmoved, he becomes the possessor of food, the food-eater, he becomes great through his offspring and cattle, through his divine knowledge, great through glory (Tait.Up. 3.6.g–j, translation M. R.)

The power opening the way to all these achievements is called brahman. As we all well know, finally this quest ended with evolving the idea of the Absolute as the source and the foundation of all there is. The Absolute is universally called brahman, in all Indian philosophies.

But at the beginning – or just in the earlier milieu and within its own terms – it was a quest for power to control the phenomena of the world, to

connect the human world with the divine reality, so longed for by the Vedic poets. The quest for power evolved into a complex, sophisticated research of the universe and the rules governing it.

As a conclusion to this article, if I was to summarise how Griswold saw the term brahman or, rather, how I understood his submissions, I would say that the best translation for the word brahman – in all its occurrences and uses across pre-classic India – would simply be: 'power.'

What makes sounds and words effective is their innate power – known in classical Indian philosophy of language as *śakti* – the power of natural ties between the words and the world (the nature of the relation between the word and its meaning is natural, *autpattika*, as the Mīmāṃsā-sūtra 1.1.5. states.) What makes any activity in the world effective is the inner power of objects and matter – again, the power of internal ties or connections between the elements of the universe, connections sought for and revealed in the Vedic Brāhmaṇas. What runs the whole universe is its inner power (in Vedic thought called *r̥ta*, in classical India – *dharma*) – the power of its structure, the order of things, according to which all there is stays in the right place and leads to the right effect. And the one and only source of all this power, the one and only source and base of the universe, as the Upaniṣads claimed, is brahman.

ABBREVIATIONS

AV	–	Atharvaveda
Ch.Up.	–	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
RV	–	R̥gveda
ŚB	–	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
Tait.Up.	–	Taittirīya Upaniṣad
TB	–	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa

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