



# The Great Awakening of Life: an Existential Phenomenological Interpretation of the *Mahat-Buddhi* in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*

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## Abstract

The *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*'s “mahat-buddhi” appears to be riddled with obscurity. Standard realist interpreters struggle to explain its cumbersome, textually unsupported bivalence, namely, how the mahat-buddhi can represent both a cosmological entity and a psychological capacity. Idealist readings, meanwhile, neglect the historically deep ontological meaning of this tattva by reducing it to a power of the transcendental ego. This paper moves beyond the impasse of the realism-idealism framework for interpreting the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* and examines the mahat-buddhi through the existential phenomenology of José Ortega y Gasset. It begins by re-framing classical *Sāṃkhya* metaphysics as an existential phenomenology of life, whereby life—as lived reality, not an external physical world or a field of mental experience—conveys the meaning of *vyaktaprakṛti*. From this, the paper then argues that the mahat-buddhi represents “the great awakening of life,” which is characterized by 5 key features: (1) purposive procreativity; (2) a power of illuminating discernment; (3) a principle of disclosure; (4) an existentially unitary, concentrated vitality; and (5) a capacity to take other-beings-as.

**Keywords** *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* · Buddhi · Mahat · Existential Phenomenology · Lived Reality

## The Puzzle of the Mahat-Buddhi in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*: a Brief Philosophical and Intellectual Historical Introduction

The *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*'s formulation of “mahat,” “buddhi,” and their interrelation represents not just an intellectual offshoot of *adhyātma* discourse, James Fitzgerald tells us, but in some respects its culmination (2015). Stemming from old *Upaniṣadic* concerns with selfhood, phenomenal experience, and liberation, *adhyātma* writings are “deliberately

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formulated, clearly ‘philosophical’ discussions of persons (*ātman*-s, ‘embodied-souls’)—their make-up, general situation in the world, and what is good, or best (*śreyas*), for them, in ultimate terms” (Fitzgerald 2017a: 670).<sup>1</sup> Included in this genre are texts of the *Mahābhārata*, *purāṇa*-s, and the classical Yoga and Sāṃkhya *darśana*-s. The *buddhi* (together with *mahat*) is a category of critical importance in this discourse. But in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* (henceforth: *SK*), it attained a “scope and clarity... [that] reached a high-water mark of epistemological, ethical, and even ontological importance” (Fitzgerald 2015: 101–102). Nevertheless, the Sāṃkhya system is riddled with puzzles that seemingly defy explanation, and the *mahat-buddhi* rests at the heart of one of them.<sup>2</sup> Standard interpretations of the *SK* (including those of Gerald Larson, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and J. A. B. van Buitenen) hold that the *mahat-buddhi* serves as both a principle of world-creation and an instrument of cognition. This first *tattva* of *vyaktapraṅkti* operates on two levels that just happen to match up: it simultaneously represents (a) a cosmological entity that exists independent of anyone’s experience, and (b) a mental power that comprises part of a human being’s subjectivity. But even the leading voices of this widely held “realist” view—namely, the view that a real world persists separate from and prior to conscious subjects—recognize the oddity of this “cosmological-cum-psychological model.”<sup>3</sup> For example, Larson (perhaps the most influential of realist interpreters) writes that “the [*Sāṃkhya*] *Kārikā* leaves many questions and issues unanswered... It is not clear whether Īśvaraḥṣṇa understands *buddhi* cosmologically or psychologically or both” (1969: 47–8).<sup>4</sup>

Common realist translations of “*buddhi*” as “intellect” and “will” further obscure the issue. Playing the role of intellect, the *buddhi* seems to passively mirror extra-mental entities to varying degrees of accuracy.<sup>5</sup> But this presupposes that a world of ready-made, extra-mental objects pre-exist the *buddhi*, though the split between empirical ego and its world only occurs with the *ahaṃkāra*, which derives from *mahat-buddhi*. Moreover, the *buddhi* is not some kind of *tabula rasa* devoid of its own structures of knowledge, volition, and emotional response. It actively contributes to the manifestation of life through its housing *karmic* residues, *bhāva*-s, and *vṛtti*-s that regulate the determinations, discriminations, and modifications of the *buddhi*. Interpreters often accommodate these functions by translating “*buddhi*” as “will.” However, the role of the *buddhi* as a passive intellect stands in direct tension with its position as an active will.

Mikel Burley critiques the standard, i.e., realist, approach and posits an alternative reading (2007). First, he contends that positing an isomorphic correspondence between cosmological and psychological orders is cumbersome and textually unwarranted: the *SK*

<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald’s works represent the most developed study of *adhyātma*, which includes classical *Sāṃkhya*’s inquiry into the nature of the *puruṣa*. Fitzgerald explains the meaning of “*adhyātma*”: “The word ‘*adhyātma*’ signifies ‘to, or over,’ that is, ‘concerning, the self or person’” (2017a: 670).

<sup>2</sup> For this short paper I use the term “Sāṃkhya” to refer just to the doctrine of the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*. However, I am well aware of the long history and rich diversity of *sāṃkhya* texts, theories, and existential *praxes*.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the characterization, “cosmological-cum-psychological model,” from Burley’s critical review of realist interpretations of the *SK* (Burley 2007: 108).

<sup>4</sup> Radhakrishnan echoes this confusion when he notes that “[the cosmological *buddhi*], as the product of *prakṛti* and the generator of *ahaṃkāra*, is different from [the psychological] *buddhi*, which controls the processes of the senses, mind and *ahaṃkāra*. If the former is identified with the latter, the whole evolution of *prakṛti* must be regarded as subjective, since the ego and the non-ego are both the products of *buddhi*. This ambiguity is found in the other products of *prakṛti* also” (1927, II: 268).

<sup>5</sup> According to standard realist interpretations, cognitive life is possible because there obtains an isomorphism between the cosmos and the psychology of the cognizer—with the already given cosmos having ontological primacy over the knowing ego.

does not concern itself with a world that exists out there, as it were, and evolves diachronically independent of the knower. He then situates Sāṃkhya in the context of Kantian and Husserlian idealisms, claiming that the *SK* examines just the nature of mental experience, wherein the *tattvas* manifest simultaneously as necessary conditions for the appearance of phenomena (2007: 6–7). Finally, he provides an Husserlian translation for “*buddhi*”: “intentional consciousness” (2007: 182). This discloses key features of the *buddhi* not captured by realist models, including its recognition of the intentional (i.e., volitional) activity of ego-consciousness (though Burley does not link this to the *karma* doctrine), the *buddhi*’s other-directedness, and the deep interconnectedness of consciousness and its objectual content. However, this interpretation misconstrues the *buddhi* (and Sāṃkhya metaphysics generally) in some key respects. Foremost among these is that *vyaktapraṛti* is irreducible to *noetic* activity and *noematic* content, while “*buddhi*” entails much more than just a principle of awareness or discernment.<sup>6</sup> But Burley makes another interpretive error—a mistake of which his realist interlocutors are also guilty: he neglects the place of *mahat* in the Sāṃkhya system, and certainly overlooks (or just misconstrues) the significance of its merging with the *buddhi*.

“*Buddhi*” has a deep and rich history, and it consistently was associated with mental processes. But Indian philosophers also examined the *buddhi* in terms of ontological themes concerning the greater universe (Fitzgerald 2017b: 768–9). This line of inquiry advanced significantly through fusing the *buddhi* with other related categories, most notably, *mahat*. One reason for this was onto-theological: “*mahat*” could well-articulate the ontological meaning of a world-generating “firstborn” or “original creator who... embodied himself in creation,” and the *buddhi* (not the *ahamkāra*, *sattva*, or any other “firstborn” candidates) became connected to the deity’s primal creativity (van Buitenen 1964: 104).<sup>7</sup> A united *mahat-buddhi* thus came to engender the self-manifestation of god in the form of a “great” (*mahat*), all-encompassing, primordial “awakening” (*buddhi*), which perpetuated the genealogy of a divine “knowledge-*ātman*” (“whose knowledge is creative of this [manifest] universe”) and the universe itself (“which is manifestly available”) (van Buitenen 1964: 112). Importantly, this lineage determined that the *mahat* should be “subordinated to a higher overarching conception of a primordial unmanifest”—that is, a purely unmanifest, uncreated “I”—and reassigned to the hierarchically ordered series of produced “evolutes” (van Buitenen 1964: 112, 107).<sup>8</sup> From here,

<sup>6</sup> Sāṃkhya’s *vyaktapraṛti* is quite unlike the cosmic illusion (*māyā*) or consciousness (*vijñapti*) of Indian idealisms such as Advaita Vedānta and Yogācāra, respectively. The *buddhi*, for its part, generates an actual, concrete reality—indeed, one that includes the first-person perspective, but which is irreducible to an “I.”

<sup>7</sup> In his impressive 1964 historical study of “*mahat*,” van Buitenen notes that from as early as the first *Upaniṣadic* creation myths, *mahat* took on ontological and epistemological significance through its association with a higher, usually divine self or person. This “large self” did not just observe and/or govern a field (*śreṭra*) of manifold phenomena, it created that very world through a willful expansion of its own body.

<sup>8</sup> van Buitenen draws our attention to a controversy already brewing in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.12.6 and *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.20: if there is an *ātman* that “transcends the merely ‘large’ one,” that is, if there is a “‘really great’ *ātman*,” then does this not imply a division between *mahat* and the true, i.e., absolutely transcendent self (1964: 106)? van Buitenen translates *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.12.6: “This is the extent of his largeness: but the Person is still larger. One quarter of his is all these beings; three quarters of him are immortal in heaven” (1964: 106). He explains this passage as follows: “The ‘large one’ is no longer great enough, and the *mahān ātma* speculations now fall in line with other trends that seek to abstract the supreme from the phenomenal world. The *avyakta* [unmanifest], *avyākṛta* [uncreated] condition of the supreme ranks higher than its condition of *mahān: mahataḥ paraṃ avyaktam*[.] ‘the unmanifest is higher than the large *Ātman*’” (*Kaṭh Up.* 3.10011; c.f., 1964: 106).

*mahat* continued its role as creator, retaining its primacy over other manifest, created principles of being. But it would henceforth assume a relationship of correlation, not subservience, with the *buddhi*, which had previously ranked beneath *mahat*.

For our purposes here, it bears noting that the *SK* represents an important part of this development. In keeping with *adhyātma* texts generally, the *SK* presents the *mahat-buddhi* as (1) a living, concrete body; (2) “the large one,” which is both the first *tattva* created (*vikṛti*) and the first *tattva* endowed with creative capacities (*prakṛti*); and (3) *other than* the authentic, unmanifest, “higher than the great” self (*puruṣa*), who is an utterly detached witness consciousness (i.e., not a governor of the field of experience). But the *SK* equally represents an intervention in the growing body of *adhyātma* literature, which was typically concerned with developing *brahmanic* intellectualism. I briefly highlight three distinguishing features of the *SK*’s inquiry into the self (*puruṣa*). (1) Sāṃkhya is non-theistic: the organism that grows from the *mahat-buddhi* is not the extension of a super-person, divine body, or an “I” (since the *ahaṃkāra* has been subordinated to the *mahat-buddhi*), but an impersonal power that is compelled by *karmic* actions. (2) Sāṃkhya is a pluralism of life, not a cosmology: the *SK* asserts not a single cosmic *mahat-buddhi* that is the material source of inert *things*, but a vision of how living organisms are born and in turn procreate other *be-ings* or lived realities.<sup>9</sup> (3) Sāṃkhya is boldly dualistic, with the *mahat-buddhi* showing itself to be neither purely material nor mere consciousness: contrary to Vedāntic monism, Sāṃkhya derives the *mahat-buddhi* from two *avyakta-s*—*mūlaprakṛti* and *puruṣa*—that are situated in a relation of dialectical compresence (*samyoga*) with each other.

This brief intellectual historical interlude corroborates what the above philosophical analysis of the *SK* reveals: realist and idealist models distort the nature of the *mahat-buddhi* (and Sāṃkhya overall). In order to move beyond this impasse, this essay proceeds with an existential phenomenological inquiry into the meaning of the *SK*’s *mahat-buddhi*. It frames this with a summary of an existential phenomenological interpretation of Sāṃkhya metaphysics generally—wherein *vyaktaprakṛti* means “life” or “lived reality,” and life represents the self-manifestation of the *samyoga* of *mūlaprakṛti* and *puruṣa*, not either of these two unmanifest principles in themselves. The essay then argues that the *mahat-buddhi* be understood as “the great awakening of life,” which is characterized by at least these 5 key features: (1) purposive procreativity; (2) a power of illuminating discernment; (3) a principle of disclosure; (4) an existentially unitary, concentrated vitality; and (5) a capacity to *take-other-beings-as*.

<sup>9</sup> It bears noting, though, that the abiding purpose of Sāṃkhya is to disclose the soteric freedom (*kaivalya*) of the *puruṣa*, not just explain how lived realities come into being. This is in keeping with *adhyātma* generally. As with other *adhyātmika-s*, Īśvarakṛṣṇa holds that what is “best” (*śreyas*) for the self is final release from the round of birth and rebirth. But having said that, I contend that Sāṃkhya’s understanding of liberation is not pessimistic or life-negating; the *SK* does not advocate a turning away from life. To the contrary, it views the realization of *puruṣa*’s liberating aloneness (*kaivalya*) as the fulfillment of the procreative intentionality of *vyaktaprakṛti*. The culmination of “procreativity made manifest” (literally, “*vyakta-prakṛti*”) is the manifestation of *puruṣa*’s absolute solitude. I explore this theme in greater detail in a larger monograph (in progress).

## Vyaktaprakṛti as Life, Life as the Self-Manifestation of Samyoga

José Ortega y Gasset's existential phenomenology can be deployed as an interpretive paradigm that reframes Sāṃkhya metaphysics in some crucial ways. At a basic level, it offers a corrective to realist and idealist formulations of Sāṃkhya metaphysics that respectively take *vyaktaprakṛti* to represent the self-manifestation of *mūlaprakṛti* ("fundamental matter") or reduce it to a set of mental categories enacted by the *puruṣa* qua transcendental ego.<sup>10</sup> But just as neither co-fundamental duad (*mūlaprakṛti* or *puruṣa*) can stand as the ground of manifest reality (*vyaktaprakṛti*), so too is the *SK* not so concerned with the cosmological origins of a material world-in-itself or the abstract structure of mental experience. Rather, Sāṃkhya concerns itself radically with lived reality and its vital foundation. It grounds *vyaktaprakṛti* on a dialogical compresence between two unmanifest principles (*mūlaprakṛti* and *puruṣa*), and looks to establish a standpoint primordial to the world, the ego, and the interrelation between the two, from which to explore the meaning of *vyaktaprakṛti* as life.<sup>11</sup>

Ortega viewed his existential phenomenology as encapsulated in his early dictum, "I am I and my circumstance" (1914: 45). He saw himself presenting a middle ground between, at one end, the epistemology of the natural sciences (in particular, biology, which reduces "life" to an external phenomenon that proceeds according to fixed patterns beyond our experience and control), and at the other end, the subjective idealist views of Neo-Kantianism and Husserlian phenomenology (which subordinate life to the mental activities of the individual subject). In lieu of either extreme, he developed a phenomenology that envisions the ultimate "I" as life or lived reality—as expressed by the first "I" in the dictum, "I am I and my circumstance." I qua life consist in an alternation between the two poles of the empirical ego (the second "I") and the ego's circumstance. The ego is defined largely by its intentionality, and circumstance is understood as "world." But this is not a merely external world. It is rather a kind of Heideggerian world of social others with whom the ego finds itself in reciprocal interrelation, but in relation to whom the ego and its alter-ego retain their mutual transcendence. Life (or "lived reality") thereby becomes defined by one's feeling pulled in two directions: falling inward into the solitude of the ego and reaching out into the horizons of the other.

<sup>10</sup> Larson expresses the realist interpretation of the *SK* when he explains that "the world in and of itself is simply 'unmanifest' (*avyakta*) apart from the presence of the *puruṣa*... the [unconscious] world in and of itself, although containing potentially everything in the manifest world, is simply an undifferentiated, unmanifest plenitude of being" (1969: 197–8). Meanwhile, the most developed idealist interpretation of Sāṃkhya is given in Burley's 2007 study. He explains: "The reorientation that I have in mind here is that which takes place when one ceases to conceive of empirical reality—that is, the world as we experience it—as something that exists outside and independently of our consciousness [*puruṣa*], and instead conceives of consciousness [*puruṣa*] as being, in some sense, the field or domain within which empirical reality exists. It is this reorientation that constitutes the first step toward idealism and away from metaphysical realism" (2007: 12–13).

<sup>11</sup> As noted above, this paper is concerned with the meaning of the *mahat-buddhi* just within the context of Sāṃkhya metaphysics, not its broader soteriology. Interestingly, Ortega's existential phenomenology has a soteriological component that helps to shed light on the interrelation between the *SK*'s metaphysics and soteriology. This is evident in the second half of Ortega's well-known dictum: "I am I and my circumstance. If I do not save it, then I cannot save myself." I take up this theme in greater detail in a larger monograph (in progress).

On the surface, Sāṃkhya metaphysics bears a similar dualist framework to that of Ortega, particularly when their fundamental relata are considered in relation to each other. Both Ortega and Sāṃkhya acknowledge multiple conscious subjects (Ortega's second "I" and Sāṃkhya's *puruṣa*) who abide in compresence with an other (circumstance, *mūlaprakṛti*) that transcends and in some sense stands opposed to the subject. Ortega's empirical ego exists in relation with and yet juxtaposed against alter-egos (other I's), and it typically encounters circumstance (which is populated by alter-egos) as limiting its freedom. According to Sāṃkhya, meanwhile, *puruṣa* is characterized by its simultaneous compresence with (*samyoga*) and ontological distinction from *mūlaprakṛti*, whose overflowing power is often represented as pulling the self into suffering (*duḥkha*).<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the self as identified with Ortega's second "I" or Sāṃkhya's *puruṣa* tends toward retreat from the other and self-enclosure as its essential condition ("I am *only* I, and not my circumstance," as it were).<sup>13</sup>

Of course, important differences lie beneath these similarities. Certainly, the *puruṣa* is not an experiencing ego, and *mūlaprakṛti* is not equivalent to a "circumstance" or "world." Nevertheless, these correlated terms display enough association that imputing Ortega's "empirical I-circumstance" framework upon Sāṃkhya metaphysics merits further exploration. Accordingly, let us shift the focus away from the equivalencies and incongruities between individual terms and toward the relation between the respective pairs of duads. I am most interested to deploy Ortega's dictum in order to illustrate the closely interrelated meanings of *vyaktaprakṛti* and *samyoga*: "I [*vyaktaprakṛti*] am [the *samyoga* of] I [*puruṣa*] and my circumstance [*mūlaprakṛti*]." <sup>14</sup> Translations such as "contact" and "conjunction" (often deployed by Larson and Burley, respectively) capture the "with"-ness ("*sam*") and "union" ("*yoga*") of *samyoga*. However, they cancel the system's dualism: recall that *mūlaprakṛti* and *puruṣa* never actually link together. Translating "*samyoga*" as "compresence" articulates not only their togetherness but also their insoluble separation. Going further, rendering *samyoga* as "dialectical compresence" highlights the series of reversals that unfurl throughout *samyoga*'s self-manifestation across the manifest *tattvas*. Transcending time, space, and *teloi*, neither *puruṣa* nor *mūlaprakṛti* can be directly presented. Rather, what gets made manifest ("*vyakta*") is a vital, life-giving power or procreativity ("*prakṛti*") generated from a dialectical exchange involving the reluctant presence of *puruṣa* and the overflowing creative urge of *mūlaprakṛti*.

In the context of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, "*logos*" implies "discourse," "a making manifest," "unconcealment" (*aletheia*), or "letting something be seen" in its togetherness with something else. The *SK* may anticipate something like this in its formulation of *vyaktaprakṛti* as uncovering itself out of hiddenness by way of the *logos* or primordial synthesis structure of *samyoga*. Instead of turning to

<sup>12</sup> For Ortega, the ego is "a *nativitate* open to the other, to the alien being," and in the case of Sāṃkhya, the *puruṣa* is susceptible to being drawn toward *mūlaprakṛti* (1932: 149–150).

<sup>13</sup> Ortega declares "man does not *appear* in solitude—although his ultimate truth is solitude (*soledad*)," while the *SK* tells us that "it is as if the indifferent one (*udāsīnah* [i.e., *puruṣa*]) is an engaged agent," though in actuality the *puruṣa* eternally abides in *kaivalya* (1932: 148; *SK* 20).

<sup>14</sup> Please note that I do not draw a correlation between Ortega's first "I" and Sāṃkhya's first "I," namely, *puruṣa*. Rather, I make use of Ortega's dictum in order to clarify the archetypal form of *vyaktaprakṛti* (which necessarily includes the *puruṣa* but is irreducible to it) by correlating it to Ortega's notion of "life" (as the first "I" in his dictum).

Heidegger's phenomenology, though, I interpret the meaning of "*samyoga*" and Sāṃkhya dualism through the dialectical compresence underlying Ortega's existential phenomenology. Through this, "*vyaktaprakṛti*" gets understood as "life" or "lived reality" (the first "I" in his dictum), and "*logos*" implies a "*dia-logos*" between self and other. Not unlike the *SK*, Ortega highlights the questions of being (namely, "what does it mean *to exist*?") and procreativity ("what does it mean to live reality, and hence generate life?") while paving a middle path between the subject-object duality of realism and the subjectivism of idealism. Life and *vyaktaprakṛti* contain a bi-directional movement of extroversion (openness to the other, or *pravṛtti*) and introversion (withdrawal into the inwardness of the I, or *nivṛtti*). Emerging in the betweenness of *puruṣa* and *mūlaprakṛti* and their two-way pull, *vyaktaprakṛti* exhibits this interplay as a vital clash that engenders lived reality.

### Mahat-Buddhi as "The Great Awakening of Life"<sup>15</sup>

An existential phenomenological interpretation of the *SK* has significant implications for a reformulation of the *mahat-buddhi*. In Sāṃkhya metaphysics, there exists a multitude of *buddhi*-s, with each *buddhi* pertaining to an individual *vyaktaprakṛti*, and each *vyaktaprakṛti* corresponding to a numerically distinct *puruṣa* in dialectical compresence (*samyoga*) with *mūlaprakṛti*. If *vyaktaprakṛti* represents a particular lived reality, then *mahat-buddhi*—as the first self-manifestation of *samyoga*—represents the concentrated vitality of that life. Construed etymologically with a view to capturing the philosophical meaning of this vital power, I take "*mahat-buddhi*" to mean "the great awakening of life."<sup>16</sup> This rendering accommodates the epistemological and ontological meanings often associated with the *SK*'s *mahat-buddhi* without suggesting a world-in-itself (à la realist studies of Sāṃkhya) or consciousness as the ground of manifest reality (per idealist renditions of the system). This gets articulated through consideration of five key features of *mahat-buddhi*.

### Kinship to Mūlaprakṛti: Mahat-Buddhi as Purposive Procreativity

As noted earlier, Sāṃkhya scholars (Burley, in particular) tend to disregard the meaning of the *buddhi*'s fusion with *mahat*. But this is misguided. With a view to the rich history of their interrelation, note that "*mahat*" appears four times in the *SK* (at *kārikās* 3, 8, 22, and 56), while "*buddhi*" has five occurrences (at *SK* 23, 35–37, and 49). The passages including "*mahat*" highlight the ontological and life-begetting meaning of *mahat-buddhi*—usually through a comparison with *mūlaprakṛti*. Though "root-procreativity" and *mahat-buddhi* are not co-original—only *mūlaprakṛti* and *puruṣa* transcend space and time, while *mahat-buddhi* derives from their *samyoga* and is spatio-temporal—the two nevertheless have priority over the manifest *tattvas*. Moreover, as "the great one," *mahat-buddhi* participates most fully in the procreative nature (*prakṛti-sarūpam* [*SK* 8])

<sup>15</sup> Please note that in forthcoming works (including a monograph on the philosophy of the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*), I take up the ideas explored here.

<sup>16</sup> The *tattvas* that derive from the *mahat-buddhi* can be theorized according to Ortega's dictum, "I am I and my circumstance." The *ahamkāra*, for example, is that mode of being which enacts the claim to life as mine—as in, "the great awakening of my life."

of *mūlaprakṛti*—a feature that does not get emphasized in those passages that use “*buddhi*,” and which the *SK* specifies as that which extends the manifest order in space and time. *SK* 22 explains: “Of [the nature of] procreativity (*prakṛteḥ*) there is the great one (*mahāms*), from that [*mahat-buddhi*] there is the *ahamkāra*, from that there is the body of sixteen, while from five of those sixteen [i.e., from the five subtle elements] there are the five gross elements” (own translation).

But we should not understand *mahat* simply in terms of a deficiency when juxtaposed with *mūlaprakṛti*. As a raw, unprocessed urge to produce, *mūlaprakṛti* cannot actually create anything because its procreativity lacks direction and objectivity. Though more akin to Schopenhauer’s blind will to life than Kant’s things-in-themselves (which bear the mere potential to be passively revealed), *mūlaprakṛti* is not a “will” in the proper sense.<sup>17</sup> It lacks the volitional drive or teleology that characterizes *mahat-buddhi*.<sup>18</sup> This “great” manifestation of *samyoga* holds the design and capacity for producing actual *vyaktaprakṛti*-s (lived realities). Harkening back to the cosmological speculations of the early *Veda*-s, *Upaniṣad*-s, and *adhyaṭma* texts (e.g., the “cosmic man” of the *Puruṣa Sūkta* or the *mahān ātman* of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.17), it is the *mahat-buddhi*—not *mūlaprakṛti*, and certainly not the *puruṣa* of the *SK*—that gives body (*liṅgam*), creative power (via the *bhāvas*), and an architecture (via the *tattvas*) to manifest reality. Indeed, *vyaktaprakṛti* inherits its procreative powers from *mūlaprakṛti*, but it is the “great *buddhi*” that generates actual lived reality and infuses it with purposiveness.

### Kinship to Puruṣa: Mahat-Buddhi and the Powers of Illumination and Discernment

A second respect in which the *mahat-buddhi* represents “the great awakening of life” concerns the *buddhi*’s role as a lamp (*pradīpa*). This metaphor points to two operations that are commonly thematized in Indian epistemology: illumination (*prakāśa*) and discernment (*adhyavasāya*). “*Prakāśa*” appears five times in the *SK*: *kārikā*-s 13 and 36 (the only two passages that use “*pradīpa*”), as well as 12, 32, and 59. Taken together, these *kārikā*-s locate the power of illumination in *prakṛti* at large (*SK* 59), the instrument (*SK* 32), and more specifically, the *buddhi* owing to its uniquely high concentration of the *satva guṇa* (*SK* 12, 13, 36). This marks an important corrective in Sāṃkhya scholarship, wherein *prakāśa* is often misattributed to *puruṣa*. This error is not without some justification. For one, Indian philosophy frequently associates the liberated self with pure translucent light (*prakāśa*); from the *Upaniṣad*-s to the classical *darśana*-s, luminosity and witnessing regularly appear as powers of the self. Classical Sāṃkhya commentators such as Vācaspati Miśra and Vijñānabhikṣu help to perpetuate this misunderstanding. They tell us that the *buddhi* makes the subtle body (*liṅgam*) appear “as if conscious” (*cetanāvad iva*, *SK* 20) by reflecting the light (*prakāśa*) of *puruṣa*. However, the *SK* positively denies that *puruṣa* bears any aptitudes, per se (since *puruṣa* is *paṅgu*, or “lame”). *Puruṣa* is an utterly passive witness-consciousness, and its witnesshood (*sākṣitvam*) is associated with inactivity (*akārṭṭybhāvaḥ*), not a capacity for assertion—not even shining (*prakāśa*) (*SK* 19). Furthermore, Īśvarakṛṣṇa

<sup>17</sup> Note that Burley draws correspondences between *mūlaprakṛti* and Kantian *things* (2007).

<sup>18</sup> And for this reason, “*buddhi*” often gets translated accordingly as “will” (Larson 1969: 239), while Burley renders it as “intentional consciousness,” which also recognizes the aspect of volition (2007: 182).



himself, in contrast with later commentators, never mentions together “*prakāśa*” and “*puruṣa*,” and even implies that the illuminatory potencies of the *buddhi* stem from its relation with *mūlaprakṛti*. Consider that *sattva* is that which enables the *buddhi* to shine a light (like a lamp). But the *sattva guṇa*, along with *rajas* and *tamas*, derives from *mūlaprakṛti*, not *puruṣa*. This represents an important deviation from the more Vedāntic leaning texts of *adhyātma* (and a distinction from classical schools such as Nyāya), wherein the *buddhi* participates in the reality of the self. According to Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s less orthodox view, the *buddhi* cannot represent an attribute or stage in the evolution of the self (*puruṣa*).

This simultaneously likens the *buddhi* to *puruṣa* (the *buddhi* is quasi-conscious) and differentiates the two (*puruṣa* is devoid of the *guṇas* and is passively aware; the *buddhi* is predominantly *sattvic* and actively shines). The apposition of the *buddhi* with the power of judgment (*adhyavasāya*) at *SK* 23 helps to sharpen this distinction. *Puruṣa* cannot anticipate, disclose, or discern objects; as sheer, unstructured awareness, it does not exhibit intentionality. The *buddhi*, though, is characterized by *adhyavasāya*, the *guṇa*-nature of which underlies the *buddhi*’s *bhāva*-configuration, namely, its respective *sattvic* and *tamasic* forms. The *buddhi* bears certain proto-compositions (the *bhāvas*) in terms of which it is other-directed and attentive-to. As a lamp, then, the *mahat-buddhi* represents not just illumination, it signifies illumination of something.

### The Ontogenesis of Samyoga: Mahat-Buddhi as Principle of Disclosure

If this analysis of the *mahat-buddhi* were to stop here, then the reader might be tempted toward the realist conclusion: *mahat* is a macro-cosmic creativity that produces an extra-mental world, and *buddhi* is the psyche (of the micro-cosmic experience of the individual) that awakens to and makes sense of the world by illuminating it. But as noted above, the *SK* does not offer a cosmological explanation of how a singular world-in-itself unfolds, nor is the *buddhi* an originally pure, blank slate that gets conditioned through experience of that world. In order to move beyond this view, I recommend that by “illumination” we mean “disclosure” or “revelation,” and that we understand “disclosure” or “revelation” in terms of neither materialism (since the *SK* does not recognize an already-given world of physical phenomena) nor theism (since what gets revealed in the *SK* is not a divine will). Rather, the disclosure (or revelation) enacted by the *mahat-buddhi* amounts to procreation itself. *Vyakta-prakṛti* is nothing other than “procreation made manifest,” i.e., revealing the production of offspring. That which the *mahat-buddhi* manifests is the self-transformation of a life-begetting, dialectical compresence (*samyoga*) involving two parents, as it were: *puruṣa* and *mūlaprakṛti*.

To draw a parallel with chemistry, just as neither hydrogen nor oxygen exhibits agency in the reaction of water or  $H_2O$ —since  $H_2O$  results from the reaction itself, not from some design or intentionality for water already inherent within hydrogen or oxygen—so too does *vyaktaprakṛti* manifest as the *samyoga* of the two gendered, life-begetting partners, *puruṣa* and *mūlaprakṛti*. Neither *puruṣa* nor *mūlaprakṛti* displays agency. Rather, what transpires is just a procession or turning forward of a depersonalized *samyoga* devoid of any agent. “*Pradīpa*” articulates the illuminatory mode of the *mahat-buddhi*: what the *mahat-buddhi* reveals is neither some world-design (a *logos* of the cosmos-itself) that exists already there (well-formed and all) nor a field of phenomena that magically *appear* to be real to a subject (but in fact are not

real). Rather, this “lamp” enacts an ontological disclosure of copulation. It reveals the transubstantiation of the *samyoga* of *puruṣa* and *mūlaprakṛti* at the very moment that it delivers a given life into being. As the first self-manifestation of this *samyoga*, *mahat-buddhi* represents a concentrated vitality or procreative power not unlike what gets symbolized by the golden womb of the *Hiraṇyagarbha Sūkta* (*R̥g Veda* 10.121). However, the *mahat-buddhi* of the *SK* derives from the dialectical compresence of two unmanifest (*avyakta*) principles, not a single creator god. Moreover, the *SK* deciphers the archetypal form of this life force not as existing external to or independent of consciousness, but as necessarily including it. Indeed depersonalized, the *mahat-buddhi* (as inchoate living organism) is not devoid of consciousness and certainly not bereft of vital power (contrary to merely physical objects). This concentrated vitality is rather that which discloses (or awakens) manifest reality as invariably lived. Life comes into being (*bhavati*, per *SK* 20) is born, or is conceived, (qua procreation as homolog to conscious awakening) at the very moment that it gets revealed, and vice versa.

### The Ontological Question of Being: Mahat-Buddhi as Unitary Phenomenon

But the *SK*'s understanding of the *mahat-buddhi* as the concentrated vitality of life (i.e., *vyaktaprakṛti*) is better captured through the lens of existential phenomenology, which deliberately goes beyond the ontogenetic model. As an intermediary toward this, again consider the language of Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Though the *mahat-buddhi* is a kind of *ur*-phenomenon of the human being, we must keep in view the ontological undertones of Sāṃkhya metaphysics. Human *be-ing* implies an underlying archetypal form that exhibits life's real self-manifestation as a unitary phenomenon. Recall that Ortega examines humans neither as biological organisms whose objective behaviors are categorizable into regular patterns (he is not engaged in a scientific study of the object as existing in-itself separate from the knower), nor as disembodied minds whose deliberations occur in isolation of their circumstance (or world). Rather, human beings—not just human organisms—display the unified ontological structure of life as “I am I and my circumstance.” Humans are self-reflective beings who reflect upon the question “what does it mean to be?”<sup>19</sup> Of those modes of being through which life exhibits itself, “being-in-the-world” is primary: “to be” is “to be in the world” (or “in a circumstance”).

Ortega's model, of course, highlights (more so than Heidegger's) that our mode of being in the world is vital and dialogical. Seen in this context, *mahat-buddhi* represents the first mode of the dialectical compresence (*samyoga*) of *puruṣa* and *mūlaprakṛti*. This is not to say that the *SK* asserts the metaphysical claim that *puruṣa* is wrapped up with *mūlaprakṛti*. Rather, what the *SK* describes is how our lived reality (as fundamentally dialogical) gets revealed, and it posits the *mahat-buddhi* as that which performs life—as if on a stage whereupon a drama plays out (per *SK* 42, 59–61, 65–66). And according to this life-drama, the *mahat-buddhi* discloses our being in the world as containing not the sum of a self-reflective subject and its circumstance, but the primary, dialogical integrity between the two—since neither a subject nor an object has yet manifested. This “vast,” “extensive,” “great” (*mahat*) mode of being shows no division between the “I” and its world, as they are held in an organic totality. Subjective

<sup>19</sup> This gives us a way of understanding statements such as “*Dasein* is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it” (Heidegger 1962: 32).

and objective worlds are hermeneutically interrelated; one relata does not get reduced to the other (the knower does not get reduced to the known, as per realist models, nor does the known get reduced to the knower, as per idealist models). As such, the *mahat-buddhi* represents the aboriginal principle of disclosing life as an undifferentiated, unitary phenomenon, holding in abeyance the architectural design of life as a dialectical unfolding of “I and my circumstance.”

### Manifesting Life with Others: Mahat-Buddhi and the Taking-as Capacity

Continuing to draw upon the close parallels between Heideggerian and Ortega phenomenologies helps to spotlight a fifth way in which the *mahat-buddhi* enacts “the great awakening of life”: namely, as a basic capacity to disclose the *taking-as* structure of lived reality. In a Heideggerian context, this *taking-as* ability is rooted in *dasein* and care. *Dasein* represents that most basic *a priori* structure of our existential constitution; it involves recognizing the primacy of our being-in-the-world over the empirical subject. “Care” denotes the being of *dasein*; it entails a way of being authentically engaged with the world. The *taking-as* structure manifests care, and it does so prior to the individuation of the “I” or the world’s having a sense of belonging *to me*. Ortega’s analysis of empathy (or “*Einfühlung*”) resembles Heideggerian care insofar as it discloses our primordial condition to be one of co-relation and concerned engagement with the other. Rather than encountering the other by happenstance or from points of separation, empathy manifests a primordial union with and fundamental openness toward the other. Empathic identification with the other, in short, reveals that life (including social life) is a unitary phenomenon (being in the world entails being with others) and that this proceeds by way of a power to *take-other-beings-as*.

Understood in terms of Heideggerian care or Ortega empathy, the *mahat-buddhi* is not just a mode of being in the world, but a mode of procreativity (or awakening to life) that includes our being with others. It performs a pre-intellectual openness to being, which is necessary for not just making things intelligible to us, but making things at all (through the “making-be” activity of the *bhāvas*). As such, the *mahat-buddhi* represents a basic power to simulate given objects that have yet to come into view. This gives valuable clues to how *mahat-buddhi* uncovers the archetypal form of lived reality as a unitary phenomenon. *SK* 35–36 explains:

Since the *buddhi*, together with the other inner instruments, *gets absorbed [avagāhate] in all objects*, then the three-fold instrument (*trividham karaṇam*) is the door-keeper (*dvāri*) and the remaining ten [the *indriyas*] are the doors. These defining characteristics of the *guṇas*, which are distinct from each other, act like a lamp (*pradīpakalpaḥ*): having revealed the whole [world] for the sake of the *puruṣa*, they present it in [the space of] the *buddhi* (italics of English terms for my emphasis).

The most basic operation of the *buddhi* is immersion in its object. This absorption involves neither the object’s getting superadded onto the *buddhi* nor the *buddhi* confusing itself with the object. Rather, such immersion is the primordial condition of the *buddhi*. It enacts an *a priori*, *taking-as* capacity that manifests life as “I am my circumstance” (that is, life as empty of empirical “I”), thereby grounding lived reality in the self-containment or non-duality of intentional consciousness and the world. Furthermore, such absorption in the

object is consonant with the disclosure of the object in the arena of the *buddhi*—as indicated by the direct succession of *kārikā* 35’s reference to how the *buddhi* gets immersed in all objects with *kārikā* 36’s note that objects get illuminated “like a lamp (*pradīpakaḥ*)... in [the space of] the *buddhi*.” Absorption, in short, is ontological disclosure, and ontological disclosure is absorption. The *buddhi* assumes the shape or character of the object at the very moment that it emanates the object; there is no succession between these two moments. Importantly, such immersion (not unlike Heideggerian care and Ortega empathy) is choiceless and necessary. “I” (qua ego) do not choose *this* object over *that* one, nor does care manifest incidentally. Rather, such concerned intentionality manifests at the ground of the empirical “I” and its vital connection to others. Empathy is the fundamental condition of life (*vyaktaprakṛti*), and life includes the ego and its circumstance. The procession of the *liṅga-sarga* (the creation order of the subtle body) corroborates this: insofar as the *ahamkāra*, which manifests the “I” and its world alongside each other, derives from the *mahat-buddhi*, care is fundamentally empty of self and other, since there is not yet any “I” who cares or any other (as distinct from an “I”) toward whom the care is directed. Thus, it is more the case that the empirical ego (in correlation with an other) is born of care than that the empirical ego cares—as if the ego were the agential ground of intentionality.

This by no means excludes the *buddhi*’s functioning elsewhere as something like an intellect that processes information or a will that enacts practical judgments. Moreover, this rendering acknowledges that, for Sāṃkhya, empirical consciousness is always *consciousness of*; empirical consciousness is never pure with respect to its being independent of context. But the experience of *what it’s like to be the other* does not belong to the empirical ego. Rather, it gets existentially situated in the *mahat-buddhi* as that fundamental *taking-as* capacity that pertains to *vyaktaprakṛti* as a mode of life’s own *great awakening*. This represents an important corrective to some deployments of the mirror metaphor for relating the nature of the *buddhi*.<sup>20</sup> Interpreting the meaning of the mirror metaphor through the lens of Ortega’s theory of *Einfühlung* offers a more accurate (with respect to the *SK*) and philosophically rich meaning. As a mirror, the *mahat-buddhi* does not represent something that exists *already there* (à la external realism). Rather, it presents the object by enabling a kind of analogical transposition of the “I” upon the other. Surely, this construction happens not by intellectual means (e.g., *buddhi* as “intellect”), but by means of a primordial sympathetic resonance. The intentionality associated with the cognizing subject always emerges out of the deep co-relation between itself and its world. And just as the *taking-as* capacity of empathy performs the ego’s referral to the other as an indispensable condition for the constitution of one’s own being-in-the-world, so too does Sāṃkhya’s *mahat-buddhi* ground the co-existence and hermeneutic interplay of the empirical ego and its circumstance in the disclosure of *samyoga*. Such a *taking-as* capacity, which is attributable to neither *puruṣa* nor *mūlaprakṛti*, is essential to the *mahat-buddhi*’s staging *the great awakening of life*.

<sup>20</sup> The term “intellect” hardly conveys the mirroring function that characterizes the *buddhi*. Though not used in the *SK* itself, this metaphor gets invoked by Sāṃkhya commentators (including Vācaspati Mīśra and Vijñānabhikṣu, among others) not to assert that the *buddhi* is transparent to and gets stimulated by an already given empirical world, but that it reflects the luminosity of *puruṣa*. (Furthermore, the mirror metaphor only appears in commentarial literature, and hence need not be seen as an essential feature of the *SK*’s understanding of the *mahat-buddhi*.)

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