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Sāṃkhya



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Synonyms

Samkhya; Sāṅkhya; Sankhya

Definition

Positing a complementary relationship between the two distinct principles of *puruṣa* (consciousness) and *prakṛti* (the emotional-mental-physical matrix), *Sāṃkhya* is considered one of six orthodox philosophies (*āstika darśana*) that subscribe to Vedic authority and is coupled with and provides the metaphysical underpinnings of Patañjali's *yoga darśana* as found in the *Yoga Sūtra* (ca. 200 CE).

Background

Some scholars deem *Sāṃkhya* to contain the foundational principles out of which most of India's diverse religious and philosophical systems have emerged. In other words, most religions and philosophies in India are, in one way or another, an elaboration and/or reconfiguration of *Sāṃkhyan*

principles. Though “proto-” *Sāṃkhyas* exist in texts such as the major *Upaniṣads* (e.g., *Chāndogya* and *Śvetāśvatara*) as well as in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Purāṇas* and while post-classical versions are found in texts such as the *Sāṃkhya-Sūtra*, scholars tend to agree that the earliest and most complete systematic rendering of *Sāṃkhya* can be found in Īśvara Kṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* (ca. 400 CE) [1]. The *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* is considered to contain the original teachings of *Sāṃkhya* as passed down and expanded from the legendary sage Kapila. Several commentaries on the text exist and serve to elucidate its teachings, perhaps the most notable of which are Gauḍapāda's *Bhāṣya*, Vācaspatimiśra's *Tattvakaumudī*, and the anonymous *Yuktidīpikā*. What follows is a description of the soteriological, epistemological, metaphysical, and practical dimensions as developed in Īśvara Kṛṣṇa's 73-verse *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* (verse numbers are in parenthesis where relevant), as well as some brief examples of prominent contemporary *Sāṃkhya* teachers and communities.

Soteriology

The *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* begins with the assertion that to be alive is to suffer (*duḥkha*) (verse 1). The text asserts that *Sāṃkhya* has been passed down with compassion as a lasting means to assist aspirants in their quest to counteract this suffering through the cultivation of spiritual knowledge

(*jñāna*) that dispels ignorance (*ajñāna*) and eventually leads to the realization of the inherent freedom of one's consciousness (*puruṣa*) (see verses 1, 62, and 70). *Sāṃkhya* provides the prescription for attaining this knowledge via the disciplined analysis (*tattva-abhyāsa*) of 25 fundamental and irreducible categories of reality known as *tattvas* (verse 64) (see Fig. 1, which will be a useful reference for understanding how the *Sāṃkhya* system works throughout this article).

Taken together, the 25 *tattvas* (literally “*thatnesses*”), which are the basic building blocks of all experience, provide a comprehensive schema to help one understand the ongoing, indissoluble link between the physical world, their body, and their emotional and mental experience. By realizing the way in which this schema repeatedly unfolds, one gains knowledge (*jñāna*) of the ontological difference between one's pure, indwelling consciousness (*puruṣa*) and the entire emotional-mental-physical matrix (*prakṛti*). To possess such knowledge is tantamount to the experience of liberation (*kaivalya*) from suffering existence (see Fig. 2).

Epistemology

Valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) may be acquired in the *Sāṃkhya* system via direct perception (*dr̥ṣṭam*), inference (*anumāna*), and/or reliable authority (*āptavacana*) (verses 4–7).

Metaphysics

Sāṃkhya espouses a theory of multiple *puruṣas*, which is to say that rather than proposing a singular, indivisible, and unitary consciousness out of which reality and experience emerges, each individual person possesses their own solitary consciousness (*puruṣa*) which, though apparently ensnared in the workings of the mind, body, and world (*prakṛti*), is ultimately and inherently free from all such activity (verse 18). *Sāṃkhya*'s notion of the self is thus quite different from *Vedāntic* notions of the relationship between *ātman* and *brahman*, wherein each individual

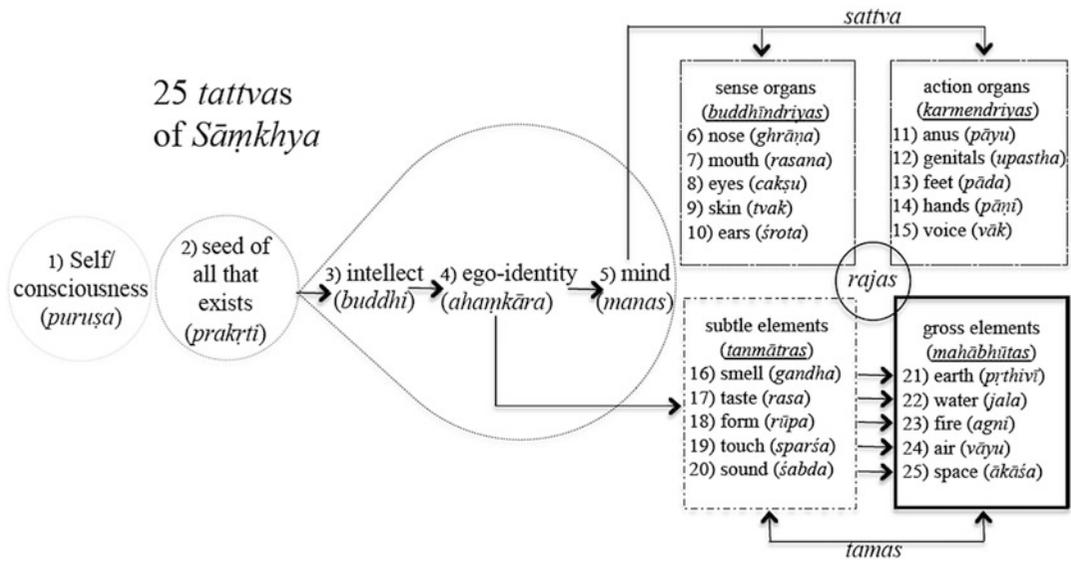
self (*ātman*) is, in the end, no different from and infinitely connected with an impersonal unitary consciousness (*brahman*) (it is also worth noting that the *Vedānta* worldview is laced with the categories of *Sāṃkhya*, including the insistence that knowledge provides the only path to freedom). By upholding a doctrine that embraces the plurality of *puruṣas*, *Sāṃkhya* espouses no such unity nor the necessity for the grace or intervention of a Supreme Being, ultimately shifting the burden of liberation to the individual.

Likewise, due to the system's silence regarding a Supreme Principle or Being, most scholars consider *Sāṃkhya* to espouse atheism. Nevertheless, as the living communities mentioned below indicate, such an atheism is not a universal feature of *Sāṃkhya* in practice. Furthermore, while *Sāṃkhya* is with little exception [2] considered to be a philosophy of realism that posits that the world fundamentally exists outside and in spite of human sensorial perception, Īśvara Kṛṣṇa does not attempt to provide an explanation of the origins of the phenomenal world itself – it has, it seems, no origins and will exist infinitely into the future with or without human sensorial contact.

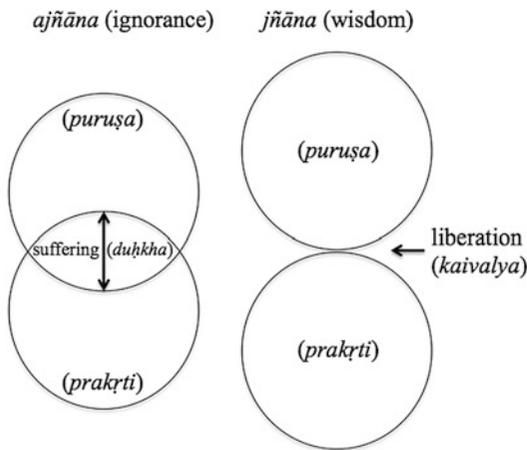
The term used to describe the totality of this phenomenal world, as well as our emotional, mental, and sensorial capacities that continually interact with it, is *prakṛti* – a word that refers to and encapsulates *everything* that exists (verse 22). As the seed of all human experience, *prakṛti* remains dormant and is referred to as *mūlaprakṛti* (verse 3) until coming into the proximity of an individual's *puruṣa*. It is precisely the friction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* that causes one's psychosomatic experience in the world to unfold (verse 21) (see Fig. 1).

Unlike *prakṛti*, *puruṣa* is merely an indifferent, inactive witness. *Puruṣa*'s sole function is to see, and it can do nothing but watch *prakṛti*. Furthermore, while *puruṣa* is purely conscious, *prakṛti* remains utterly unconscious. Due to the fundamental differences between the two, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* rely upon one another in a relationship of mutual reciprocity: one acts, while the other merely observes (verse 21, 56–61).

According to *Sāṃkhya*, suffering results when *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* become unduly misidentified



Sāṃkhya, Fig. 1 The 25 tattvas of Sāṃkhya



Sāṃkhya, Fig. 2 Ignorance (*ajñāna*) and knowledge (*jñāna*)

with one another (verse 20) (see Fig. 2). This fundamental misidentification stimulates a creative unfolding of psychosomatic experience (*pariṇāma*), and the quality and extent of suffering within one’s life depend wholly upon their individual disposition, or *bhāva*, a concept that will be elucidated in the following section (verses 24–26, 62–65) (see Fig. 3).

Practical Dimensions of Sāṃkhya

During the process of *pariṇāma*, the relative proportion of three perpetual qualities (*guṇas*) known as *sattva* (buoyancy and luminosity), *rajas* (activity, movement, and stimulation), and *tamas* (inertia, darkness, and density) wholly determines the quality and manner by which *prakṛti*’s creative unfolding, and thus the extent of one’s psychosomatic experience of suffering in the world, occurs (verses 24–26). The *guṇas* exert their influence on one’s experience from within one’s intellect (*buddhi*, the third *tattva*, which is the seat of emotion and the subtlest layer of perceptible human experience; see Fig. 1), which will necessarily be predominated by one of these three qualities (verse 23). First, if one’s *buddhi* is predominately characterized by *sattva* due to a personal history of acting powerfully, virtuously, and with sensual continence, this individual will manifest in the world with a powerful (*aiśvarya*), virtuous (*dharma*), and continent (*vairāgya*) disposition (*bhāva*) (verses 63–65) (see Fig. 3). In the *sattvic* condition, commentator Gauḍapāda writes, “. . .the limbs become light, the intellect becomes bright and the organs become clear. . . the organs are *Sāttvika*, pure and capable of apprehending their objects. . .” [3].

Bhāvas of the Buddhi
(dispositions of the intellect)

Sattva

aiśvarya (power)

dharma (virtue)

vairāgya (continence)

***jñāna* (knowledge)**

Tamas

anaiśvarya (weakness)

adharma (vice)

rāga (incontinence)

ajñāna (ignorance)

Sāṃkhya, Fig. 3 *Bhāvas of the Buddhi* (dispositions of the intellect)

Having cultivated a *sattvic* disposition (*bhāva*), the *buddhi*, devoid of attachment, weakness, and vice, is predisposed for the experience of liberation from suffering as the routine misidentification of *puruṣa* with the *prakṛtic* matrix ceases (verses 23, 64–65). Thus in this condition, rather than projecting consciousness outward, the *sattvic buddhi* serves its main purpose as it merely reflects experience from the world, through the body and mind, and back to witness consciousness (*puruṣa*) (verses 36–37). In this state, destructive, addictive tendencies cease as the emotions and senses remain under the control of the powerful, continent, and virtuous individual. One no longer craves ephemeral satisfaction in the material and no longer clings to mental-emotional disturbances, though one also eventually releases attachment even to *sattva*, and liberating knowledge (*jñāna*) is thus attained (verse 63).

In direct contrast to the *sattvic* condition, a *buddhi* characterized by weakness (*anaiśvarya*), vice (*adharma*), and sensual incontinence (*rāga*) will result in the manifestation of a *tamasic* disposition (*bhāva*) (verse 23) (see Fig. 3). Consequently, rather than possessing self-control, virtuosity, and power as indicated in the *sattvic* condition, the opposite will emerge. The *tamasic* condition threatens, as Frank Podgorski writes, “deeper entanglements and unfoldings with more ingrained misidentifications within our observable world” [4]. Addicted and out of control, the senses unduly ensnare one’s consciousness in the allure of emotional and physical phenomena. Using a contemporary example, one abiding in a *tamasic* condition might be unduly addicted to sense objects such as food, intoxicants, and consumer goods, while in the absence of such objects,

suffering from underlying emotional disturbances ensues.

A third possibility, *rajas*, represents the movement and activity that manifest in daily life. A *buddhi* with a predominance of *rajas* will result in an agitated state of mind leading to restlessness and discontentment. In contemporary times, such a state propels an individual into a seemingly endless search for satisfaction in various activities such as work, exercise, and entertainment that can only exacerbate, rather than obviate, their suffering. In reality, the *guṇas* of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* continually interact in varying proportions to produce countless varieties of embodied human experience in the world (verses 12–13).

In sum, considering the ways in which the three *guṇas* have the capacity to affect the quality of our human experience, *Sāṃkhya* asserts that it is a metaphysical imperative that one strives to cultivate *sattva* to the utmost. Cultivating *sattva* draws one’s consciousness inward and thus out of its undue ensnarement within *prakṛti*, where one would otherwise be bound to the emotional-material world in unhealthy, addictive, and restrictive ways. *Sāṃkhya* therefore prescribes a process of purification where in addition to relinquishing undue attachment to the sensory and emotional world; one simultaneously cultivates knowledge, or *jñāna*, the only *bhāva* that will ultimately liberate an individual from suffering. *Jñāna*, as *Sāṃkhya* describes it, is liberating knowledge or the direct perception of the difference between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. One cultivates *jñāna* by continually analyzing the phenomenal world in which they find themselves via the practice of *tattva-abhyāsa*, beginning with the densest strata of *prakṛti* comprised of the gross elements of earth (*pṛthivī*), water (*jala*), fire (*agni*), air (*vāyu*), and space (*ākāśa*), moving then to the reflection on the increasingly subtle features of experience including the five sense organs (*buddhīndriyas*), the subtle elements (*tanmātras*), the action organs (*karmendriyas*), the mind (*manas*), the ego (*ahaṃkāra*), and the intellect (*buddhi*) (See Fig. 1). As one gains intimacy with these basic and irrefutable building blocks of experience both individually and in concert, sensitivity to the inextricable link

between the gross physical world and one's psychosomatic experience arises. The entire *prakṛtic* matrix comprised of one's emotions, thoughts, body, and world comes to be understood as an indissolubly connected reality operating in service to the independent, witnessing consciousness or *puruṣa*. *Sāṃkhya* refers to this link between one's inner and outer reality as mediated through the body as *satkāryavāda* (verses 8–11), a doctrine that asserts that *prakṛti* as manifest (*vyakta*) in one's perceptible embodied experience is a direct expression of *prakṛti*'s subtle, unmanifest (*avyakta*) seed condition (*mūlaprakṛti*) mediated by the condition of one's *bhāvas* (see Fig. 3).

Paradoxically, through the cultivation of *jñāna*, one comes to the understanding that *puruṣa* has always been and will forever remain fundamentally free from the trappings of the *prakṛtic* matrix and that the experience of suffering was merely a misidentification and misperception of *puruṣa*'s inherently liberated nature (verse 62). This experience, again referred to as *kaivalya*, is thus the realization of the perennial complementarity between the two distinct principles of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*.

Living Sāṃkhya Communities

To varying degrees and with novel iterations, *Sāṃkhya* continues to be incorporated into the teachings of many contemporary spiritual communities. Perhaps one of the most explicit practicing communities is Hariharānanda Āraṇya's (1869–1947) Kāpila Maṭha in Jharkhand, India, which, significantly, espouses the efficacy of worshipping God as Īśvara through devotional hymns written by Hariharānanda himself. Here, the guru lives in a cave and represents *prakṛti* in the unmanifest seed state (*avyakta*, *mūlaprakṛti*) [5, 6]. In America, Gurāṇi Añjali's (1935–2001) Yoga Anand Ashram in Amityville, New York, espouses a worldly-engaging *Sāṃkhya* practice that deploys the use of music and bodily practice,

as well as *tattva-abhyāsa*, to assist practitioners in their quest, as Añjali once wrote, "...to look for *puruṣa*... *Puruṣa* that is bound from within" [7, 8]. Loyola Marymount University's Master of Arts in Yoga Studies curriculum continues to disseminate these *Sāṃkhya* practices under the direction of Dr. Christopher Chapple, a former student of Añjali. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the celebrated yoga guru B. K. S. Iyengar himself was known to wear a gold amulet around his neck that was inscribed with the 25 *tattvas*.

Cross-References

- ▶ [āstika darśana](#)
- ▶ [Patañjali](#)
- ▶ [Yoga](#)
- ▶ [Yoga Sūtra](#)

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