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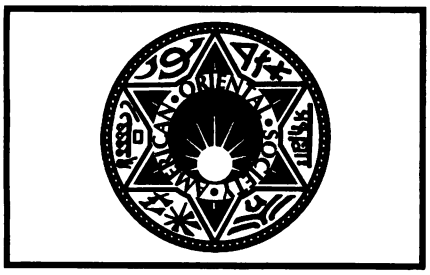

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EDIFYING PUZZLEMENT: *ṚGVEDA* 10.129 AND THE USES OF ENIGMA

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This paper reconsiders *ṚV* 10.129 in order to explore its meaning and the more general functions of riddle hymns and other enigmas in the Veda. Its starting point is the unresolved question that concludes the hymn. This question calls into doubt the possibility of any cosmogonic narrative, including the narrative that the hymn itself has just offered. The lack of resolution within the hymn causes the audience of *ṚV* 10.129 to reflect. But in doing so, that audience is actually recovering the power of creation, for the hymn identifies thinking as the original creative activity. Thus, the solution to the hymn and to the question of the origin of things rests both in what the poem says and, even more, in the response it evokes from its audience.

Some things my treatise will hint; on some it will linger; some it will merely mention.
It will try to speak imperceptibly, to exhibit secretly, and to demonstrate silently.
Strom. 1.1.15.1; *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 302b

The truth is at the bottom of a bottomless world.
Sebastian Venable

THE APPEAL OF *ṚV* 10.129 is immediate and strong: its narrative is engagingly obscure; its aims tantalizingly opaque. And, especially for contemporary readers, its concluding uncertainty about the origins of things is disturbingly familiar. Aside from its human and contemporary appeal, it also stands as a critical text in reconstructions of Indian cultural history. Scholars have often presented it as an admirable and original precursor of later religious thought,[1] and indeed, the influence of the hymn is apparent in cosmogonic discourse from both the early and later Indian tradition. In what follows, I will mention cosmogonies in the *Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa* and the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* and *Āraṇyaka* that interpret or reconfigure this hymn, but references to it are not limited to Vedic literature. For example, Kṛṣṇa alludes to it during his explanation of the origin of the world in *Mahābhāratah* 12.329.3, and the creation account that opens the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* echoes the hymn, as several of its commentators have recognized.[2]

One measure of the hymn's impact is the long shadow of scholarly literature that has attached itself to it. The list of those who have commented on the hymn constitutes an impressive roster of Vedic studies' greatest names: Geldner, Gonda, Oldenberg, Thieme, among many others.[3] In reconsidering this hymn, I hope to do more than simply intrude on such distinguished company. I am try-

This paper is dedicated, with much affection, to Calvert Watkins in celebration of his sixty-fifth birthday. I have cited some of his work in the course of my argument, but those familiar with his studies of Indo-European poetics will understand that his influence is pervasive and my debt to him substantial.

[1] E.g., P. Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanishads* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), 128; and J. Varenne, *Cosmogonies védiques* (Paris: Societé d'édition «Les Belles Lettres», 1982), 156. In this paper, I will argue that to view the hymn as offering a philosophic cosmogony undermines its implied intention and distorts its interpretation. This misperception of the nature of the hymn is partly responsible for its sour reception in W. D. Whitney, "The Cosmogonic Hymn, Rig-Veda X.129," *JAOS* 11 (1882): cix–cxi; and the begrudging one in A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, Harvard Oriental Series, vols. 31–32 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1925), 435ff.

[2] Cf. G. Bühler, tr., *The Laws of Manu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), 2, n. 5.

[3] For an extensive bibliography and review of scholarship on this hymn, in addition to a careful interpretation of it, see W. H. Maurer, "A Re-examination of Ṛgveda X.129, the Nāsadīya Hymn," *JIES* 3 (1975): 210–37. To this discussion add also Varenne, 156–58, 224–26; W. D. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 25f.; and L. Renou, *Études védiques et pāṇinéennes*, vol. XVI (Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1967), 168f. I will assume the bibliographic material that

ing to advance the discussion by approaching the hymn in a different way, namely, by concentrating on its rhetorical, structural, and other formal features. The justification for this approach was best stated by Stephanie Jamison in her study of the myths of the "ravenous hyenas" and the "wounded sun."[4] In her discussion, she attends to the precise way that each myth is told and draws interpretive conclusions from its specific construction. In explaining her method, she argues that a myth's "language *is* the myth, . . . not an accidental form that the myth has assumed and can as easily abandon" (p. 32). And if the form of the text is critical to the meaning of the text in Vedic prose, it is even more so in Vedic poetry. For Vedic poetry, like all poetry, expresses meaning not only through its semantics but through sound, structure, metrics, and the conventions of the poetic tradition in which it is embedded. According to Roman Jakobson, poeticity, whenever it occurs, exists "when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality."[5] In the final analysis, all I am proposing to do is to consider this poem as a poem, and therefore to attend to the shape and placement of its words and to the rhythms and structure of its verses. This approach results in a more dense interpretation and one more firmly anchored in the text of the hymn. Such attention to the verbal surface of the hymn also honors the careful and exacting composition characteristic of the Vedic poets.

However, my concern is not limited to the hymn's form and conventions, but includes also its effect on its ancient audience, to the extent that it is possible to reconstruct that response. This reconstructed response is primarily a projection from the text and relies on my understanding of Vedic perspectives, literary conventions, and poetic traditions. I have tried to supplement it by attention to the actual responses to the hymn within the Vedic corpus itself in the ways that Vedic texts have used and applied the hymn.

For a hymn that is generally classified as a cosmogony, *ṚV* 10.129 is remarkably contrary.[6] In a sense, it is really an anticosmogony, for the hymn itself rules out the possibility of constructing a final description of the origins of the world. That is, after having presumably described these origins, the last two verses ask whether anyone truly does know how the world arose. The gods don't—they originated after the creation of the world (according to vs. 6)—and according to vs. 7, even the world's "overseer in the highest heaven" might not know. It is this character of the hymn that subverts many of the previous attempts to understand it, for interpreters have tried to do what the hymn explicitly says cannot be done. In one way or another, they have attempted to make it into a cosmogony, despite the hymn's direct denial that the origin can be described.

The formal features of the last verse function to underscore the hymn's lack of resolution. Line 7*b*, *yádi vā dadhé yádi vā ná*, has only nine syllables, two syllables shy of the normal eleven-syllable line. Consider the effect of this shortening. Except for some metrical hiccups in lines 3*b* and 6*b*, the hymn has been rolling along with regular triṣṭubh after regular triṣṭubh. Then, at almost the end, 7*b* begins with a proper opening of five syllables, continues with a regular break of two syllables, but then concludes with a cadence that ends abruptly after two syllables rather than the normal four. The line stops short, as if the poet had suddenly stepped on his own metrical shoe-laces. The rhythmic incompleteness of the line stands out particularly strongly because it could so easily be corrected. We can have the expected eleven-syllable line by supplying a second *dadhé*,[7] a word that must be assumed in the translation anyway. It is like hearing the beat of "shave and a haircut," to which we naturally, even urgently, want to add "two bits." Whether created by accident or intention,[8] this metrically unresolved cadence is a verbal image of the unresolved cosmogony. Moreover, the metrically incomplete line anticipates the hymn's syntactically incomplete conclusion, 7*d só aṅgá veda yádi vā*

Maurer provides, and therefore I cite previous literature only when it is directly relevant to the interpretation offered here. But one study is basic to any discussion of the hymn and therefore deserves particular mention: K. F. Geldner, *Zur Kosmogonie des Rigveda mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Liedes 10, 129* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1908).

[4] S. W. Jamison, *The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun: Myth and Ritual in Ancient India* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

[5] R. Jakobson, "What is Poetry?" in *Selected Studies*, III: *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), 750.

[6] This study will examine each verse of the hymn in detail; a translation accompanies the Sanskrit in each case.

[7] That is, read *yádi vā dadhé yádi vā ná *dadhé*. Note that the second *dadhé* "it was produced" must be assumed in the translation: "if it was produced or if (it was) not (produced)." This restoration would yield only the slight irregularity of a short tenth syllable. Cf. E. V. Arnold, *Vedic Metre In Its Historical Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1905), 185, 324.

[8] Most interpreters have treated it as defect, e.g., Geldner, *Kosmogonie*, 23; but this view may underestimate the creativity of Vedic poets. In any case, it is a potentially meaningful irregularity.

ná véda.[9] This line ends with a subordinate clause, for which there is no main clause: "he surely knows. Or if he does not know . . . ?" Thus, the metrical and then the syntactic incompleteness of the two lines act as metaphors for the unconcluded cosmogony.

Finally, note that the last verse echoes the opening of the hymn. The word *vyòman* "highest heaven" is repeated in the last verse for only the first time since it appeared in the opening verse, and the final *ná véda* "he does not know" recalls the opening *nā́sad āsīt*. Such recursive composition, in which the beginning is repeated at the end, is common in Indo-Iranian and Indo-European poetry.[10] It normally functions to define and to close a unit of discourse by marking its beginning and end. In this case, however, the ring has the effect not of bringing the hymn to closure, but rather of suggesting that there has been no real solution to the questions posed at the beginning. The semantics of the repeated elements point to this lack of resolution: *vyòman* describes a realm outside of human experience and "there was not" concludes in "he knows not." Uncertainties at the beginning become uncertainties at the end.

If there is no resolution, if finally the hymn leaves its auditors without a description of the origin of things, then why was the hymn composed in the first place? To address this problem, we have to return to the beginning of the hymn and to look carefully at its narrative movement, for, I suggest, the poem's meaning is to be found more in the path it follows than the place it arrives.

The poem opens with dramatic obscurity:

nā́sad āsīn nó sád āsīt tadā́nīṃ
nā́sīd rájo nó vyòmā paró yát
kím ā́varīvaḥ kúha kásya śármann
ámbhaḥ kím āsīd gáhanaṃ gabhīrám

The non-existent did not exist, nor did the existent exist at that time.
There existed neither the midspace nor the heaven beyond.
What stirred? From where and in whose protection?
Did water exist, a deep depth?

The narrative begins "at that time" (*tadā́nīm*) when none of the divisions that characterize the world existed. What there was cannot be described as either *ásat* "non-existent" nor as *sát* "existent." In many translations, *ásat* and *sát* are taken as abstract nouns: "non-being" and "being" or "non-existence" and "existence."[11] But formally and firstly they are adjectival, and without any contrary signal in the text or the context, that is how the hymn's earliest audience would likely have understood them.[12] Indeed, this is the interpretation of the oldest commentary on this hymn, *ŚB* 10.5.3.1: *nèva vā́ idám ágre 'sad āsīn nèva sád āsīt* "In the beginning, this (world) was in no way non-existent, and it was in no way existent."[13] The brāhmaṇa supplies a subject for the adjectives "existent" and "non-existent," namely, *idám* "this (world)."[14] Unlike the brāhmaṇa, however, the hymn leaves the subject unstated. Rather, it allows its audience to imagine a thing which neither exists nor does not exist.

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[9] The link between lines *b* and *d* is initially created by their structural similarity. Both place the verb in the center of the line and begin the break and cadence with *yádi vā ná*. These echoes draw attention to their connection and thereby accent their common feature, namely, their incompleteness.

[10] For early Vedic, cf. J. Gonda, *Vedic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 186. For Avestan literature, see H.-P. Schmidt, "Die Komposition von Yasna 49," in *Pratidānam F. B. J. Kuiper* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), 186f., 191f.; idem, "Associative Technique and Symmetrical Structure in the Composition of Yasna 47," in *Neue Methodologie in der Iranistik*, ed. R. Frye (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1974), 321, 328f.; idem, *Form and Meaning of Yasna 33* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1985), 47. This feature of Indo-Iranian poetry is an inheritence from Indo-European convention. Cf. C. Watkins, "Aspects of Indo-European Poetics," in *The Indo-Europeans in the Fourth and Third Millennia*, ed. E. C. Polomé (Ann Arbor: Karoma, 1982), 109–11. On recursive structure in later Vedic literature and ritual, see also J. P. Brereton, "'Why is a Sleeping Dog Like the Vedic Sacrifice?': The Structure of an Upaniṣadic *Brahmodya*," in *Inside the Texts, Beyond the Texts*, ed. M. Witzel (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 1–14.

[11] E.g., H. Oldenberg, *Ṛgveda: Textkritische und exegetische Noten*, Abh. der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, n.f., 11.5, 13.3 (Berlin, 1909–12), *ad loc*. The two words are substantives in *ChU* 6.2.1–2, but by the time of the *Chāndogya*, the religious and literary contexts had changed and these terms had begun to develop a technical and abstract meaning.

[12] See especially Maurer, "Reexamination," 221f. n. 12, who makes the same point.

[13] I understand *nèva* to be a strong rather than a qualified negative → J. P. Brereton, "The Particle *iva*," *JAOS* 102 (1982): 443–50. The point the brāhmaṇa makes is that what is at the beginning *certainly* cannot be described as existing, for there is no object, and it *certainly* cannot be described as not existing, because then nothing would come to be.

[14] This word is likely drawn from the phrase *sárvam . . . idám* in line 3*b*. This interpretation still leaves undecided how "this world" can be understood as neither existent nor non-existent. The brāhmaṇa's answer to this question, discussed below, is critical to the interpretation of the hymn.

The negations of the first line continue in line *b*: "There was neither midspace nor heaven"—and then give way to questions in *c*: "What stirred? Where? In whose protection?" Only at its end does vs. 1 move toward something more concrete. In the last line, it suggests that there might have been water, although even here the suggestion is posed as a question.[15] The form of the verse thus traces a movement from negation to question to a questionable possibility.

The second verse then mirrors the first:

ná mṛtyúr āsīd amṛ́taṃ ná tárhi,
ná rā́tryā áhna āsīt praketáḥ
ā́nīd avātáṃ svadháyā tád ékaṃ,
tásmād dhānyán ná paráḥ kíṃ canā́sa

Death did not exist nor deathlessness then.
There existed no sign of night nor of day.
That One breathed without wind through its inherent force.
There existed nothing else beyond that.

The verse proceeds in almost exact parallelism to vs. 1. It also concerns what was "then" (*tárhi*), as vs. 1 described what was "at that time" (*tadā́nīm*)—indeed, the two words appear in corresponding positions at the ends of the first lines. Line 2*a* mimics the negations of *ásat* and *sát* in the negations of *mṛtyú* "death" and *amṛ́ta* "deathlessness."[16] In line *b*, where vs. 1 denies that "midspace" and "heaven" existed, vs. 2 says that there was no "sign of night" nor "sign of day"—referring to the moon and sun.[17] If there is an advance in the process of creation reflected in 2*ab*, it lies in the fact that vs. 2 mentions specific items rather than general categories. "Death" and "deathlessness," which imply, more concretely, mortal men and immortal gods, replace the "non-existent" and the "existent." Specific celestial bodies—moon and sun—replace the spatial categories in which they exist, "midspace" and "heaven."[18] But what kind of progress is this? Neither the general nor the specific entities actually appear. The only real movement exists in the image created by the hymn, the more detailed and concrete knowledge of what is not there. The only real change is in the thinking of those hearing the hymn, not in the state of creation. This is a critical point, to which I will return.

In line 2*c*, the situation alters suddenly with the introduction of the "One," whose appearance is dramatically postponed to the end of the line. Thus, just at the point in vs. 1 where the poet switches from general negations to questions concerning what *might* exist, vs. 2 shifts from specific negations to an affirmation concerning what *does* exist.

The structural parallelism of 1*abc* and 2*abc* results in other correspondences in 1*c* and 2*c*. As Geldner[19] has pointed out, the answer to the question "what stirred?" (*ā́varīvar*) in 1*c* is hidden in 2*c*. The key to this is the verb *ā́varīvar*, which can mean "move around," "move back and forth," or "stir."[20] On the basis of Vedic parallels, Geldner showed that *ā́varīvar* here describes the

[15] The end of the line, *gáhanaṃ gabhīrám*, might be read as a statement ("the depth was deep") or an independent question ("did there exist a deep depth?"), as well as an epexegetic question, as my translation suggests. However the words are to be construed, the tautology suggested by their common derivation and their homophony creates the sense of having progressed nowhere in the verse. There is nothing asserted of the depth, other than its own character as deep. The idea that there may have been water at the beginning would have been familiar to the hymn's audience. Cf. *TB* 1.1.3.5: *ā́po vā́ idám ágre salilám āsīt* "Now, in the beginning, this (world) existed as the waters, an ocean"; and *TĀ* 1.23.1.

[16] The sequence of words forms a chiasmus with the two negated terms at the borders, the two positive terms in the center: *ásat . . . sát . . . mṛtyúḥ . . . amṛ́tam.* The poet employs such chiasmic ordering elsewhere in the hymn as well. See vs. 5*cd*, below.

[17] So P. Thieme, *Gedichte aus dem Rig-Veda* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1964), 66. A version of *ṚV* 10.129 also occurs at *TB* 2.8.9.3–5, and, as Geldner (*Kosmogonie*, 17) notes, Sāyaṇa's commentary on this passage similarly identifies the sign of day as the sun and the sign of night as the moon and constellations.

[18] Note that the parallelism of these two verses explains why vs. 1 speaks of space and heaven rather than earth and heaven. The sun occupies the heaven, and space is the place of the moon. The author of Genesis 1:1–2:4a follows a similar literary strategy. On the first day of creation, God brings forth light and on the fourth day, the objects that create light: the sun, moon, and stars. On the second day, God makes the sky and seas, and on the fifth, the birds and fish that inhabit them. Finally, on the third day, God makes land, and on the sixth, the plants, land animals, and humans. In this case too, then, the text refers to the broad category (light, air and water, land) and then to its specific, concrete realizations or inhabitants (luminaries, birds and fish, land creatures).

[19] K. F. Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsch übersetzt*, Harvard Oriental Series, vols. 33–35 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1951), ad 1*c*.

[20] There has been some scholarly debate about whether *ā́varīvar* is from *vṛ* "cover" or *vṛt* "turn." I follow Oldenberg (*Noten*), who argued concisely and convincingly for *vṛt*. There may be other possible interpretations of *ā* + *vṛt* implied here, especially the sense of "evolve," but the sense "stir (like the wind or breath)" is the one most strongly embedded in the context of the hymn.

movement of the wind or breath.[21] Initially in 1*c*, an implied reference to the wind or breath remains only a possibility, since there might be other things that move back and forth.[22] The confirmation of this interpretation comes in vs. 2, for the movement back and forth in 1*c* occupies the analogous position to that of the "breathing" of the One in 2*c*. Thus, the answer to the question, "what stirred?" is the life breath of that One from which the world began.[23]

But if 2*c* answers the question of 1*c*, and if indeed the whole of vs. 2 defines what vs. 1 suggests, then the "One" that appears in 2*c* must not really be a new thing. It too should have occurred in vs. 1, if only by suggestion or hidden reference. The "One" must be the name and form of the implicit subject of the first verse—the previously undefined something that is neither "non-existent" nor "existent." Note that in vs. 2 the One is called "*that* One" (*tád ékam*). The *sá* pronoun is ordinarily anaphoric,[24] and if it is so here, then the only thing to which it could refer is the unidentified subject of 1*a*. The "One," whatever it may be, has been present from the beginning of the poem.

The second verse thus strengthens the tension between the narrative's increasing specificity and the sense that nothing actually is happening. This tension is deepened by the third verse, which apparently starts over once again:

táma āsīt támasā gūḷhám ágre
'praketáṃ salilám sárvam ā idám
tuchyénābhv ápihitaṃ yád āsīt
tápasas tán mahināyataíkam

Darkness existed, hidden by darkness, in the beginning.
All this was a signless ocean.
When the thing coming into being was concealed by emptiness,
then was the One born by the power of heat.

Like the first lines of vss. 1 and 2, line 3*a* ends with an indicator of time (here *ágre* "in the beginning") that once again places the verse back at the origins. In the opening two lines of vs. 3, however, there are subtle indications of movement, even though it is movement within a framework that remains essentially static. So, as vs. 1 begins *nā́sad āsīt* "the non-existent did not exist" and vs. 2 *ná mṛtyúr āsīt* "death did not exist," this verse begins *táma āsīt* "darkness existed." The absence of the negative *ná* is an indication of a change, although this change still leaves the hymn's audience very much "in the dark." Or again, in line *b apraketám* "signless" recovers *ná . . . praketáḥ* "no sign" in 2*b*, but it also marks a shift from a state in which there is "no sign" to one in which there is a "signless" something. Finally, *salilá*, the ocean, which the verse says did exist (*āḥ*), recalls the water (*ámbhaḥ*) that 1*d* suggests might have existed.[25] A further formal feature that indexes a significant shift is the repetition of *āsīt* and *āḥ* "existed" in lines *ab* and *c*. In vs. 3, unlike vss. 1 and 2, the verb *as* "exist" never occurs with a negating *ná*.

The formal variations and repetitions in 3*ab* thus imply a development, but it is a modest change, and its limited extent is reflected in the content of the verse. Line *a* offers the image of a form without substance: there is a "darkness, hidden by darkness" (*támaḥ . . .támasā gūḷhám*), a core of darkness is surrounded by a covering of darkness. Line *b* presents an image of substance without form: there is an ocean, but it is "signless," one with no describable shape. A real manifestation of both form and substance, or "name and form" to use later terminology, remains incomplete.

[21] *Der Rig-Veda,* ad loc. Consider, for example, the verse that occurs as both *ṚV* 1.164.31 and as 10.177.3: *ápaśyaṃ gopā́m ánipadyamānam, ā́ ca párā ca pathíbhiś cárantam, sá sadhrīcīḥ sa víṣūcīr vásāna, ā́ varīvarti bhúvaneṣv antáḥ* "I saw the never resting cowherd, moving near and far along its paths. Clothing itself in (the waters) that converge and separate, it moves around within the (living) worlds." In 1.164, the verse likely describes the breath, which is mentioned in the vs. 30. The movement of the *prāṇa*s is also described by forms of *vṛt* in *Mbh* 12.178.3, 6, 7, etc. (cited by Renou, *EVP*, 16:168). In 10.177.3, the primary reference is probably to the movement of the sun (so Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda*, ad loc., citing Sāyaṇa).

[22] Citing *TĀ* 5.6.4, Sāyaṇa takes the verb to refer to the sun, but the internal evidence of the hymn weighs against this alternative.

[23] Further, the breathing of the One is "windless," a description that could evoke a number of associations. Perhaps the One is the potential world, for if its breath were perceptible, then that breath would be the manifest, universal breath which is the wind. The correspondence of the wind and breath is a repeated figure in Vedic literature. Among the many examples are *ṚV* 10.16.3; *MS* 2.3.5 (32:15f.), 2.5.1 (48:3), 3.4.3 (48:7), 4.5.8 (75:1f.); *PB* 4.6.8; *ŚB* 5.2.4.10, 8.4.1.8; *JB* 2.137, 184, 197, 389; and *TĀ* 3.12.6. Or again, perhaps the One is alive, but not in the usual way, for it breathes without the movement of air. Its life is like that of a plant, or more likely, like that of an embryo or an egg.

[24] Cf. S. W. Jamison, 'Vedic *'sá figé'*: An Inherited Sentence Connective?" *KZ* 105 (1992): 227.

[25] The opening repetition *támaḥ . . . támasā* also recalls the closing *gáhanaṃ gabhīrám* of vs. 1.

Just as in vs. 2*c*, where indefinite and negative descriptions are interrupted by the appearance of the One, so in 3*c* there appears something called an *ābhú*, a term that, like the object it describes, is resolutely indeterminate. The semantic and grammatical functions of the word are unclear—it has been translated as an adjective,[26] as an abstract noun,[27] or as a concrete noun[28]—but more significantly, it has two possible derivations. It could be from *a* (privative) + *bhū* and thereby describe something "not become," or it could be related to *ā* + *bhū* "come into being." Thus, the word could imply non-existence, or it could imply just the opposite, a coming into existence.

The context surely favors the more usual derivation from *ā* + *bhū* "come into being." In 2*c*, the One suddenly emerged, and therefore we would expect there to be a something at the corresponding position in 3*c*.[29] On the other hand, in vs. 3 the *ābhú* is described as concealed in emptiness, just as darkness is hidden in darkness in line *a*. As the core and the covering in line *a* are both forms of darkness, so those hearing the hymn could have imagined the core and covering in line *c* to be forms of emptiness. For this interpretation, a meaning "empty" for *ābhú* would be more appropriate.[30] Thus the possibilities for interpreting *ābhú* as something "coming into being" and as something "empty" make this a word which embodies the ambiguous situation the verse describes, a state hovering between non-existence and existence.

This core and covering, described in 3*a* and 3*c*, further recall another image in 1*c*. There the poet asks "in whose protection" lies the unidentified subject. Here again, the image is of something surrounding or covering something else.[31] Over these first three verses, then, the hymn creates a trajectory in which the shape of core and a cover is first raised as a possibility (in 1*c*), then described paradoxically as a form whose outer and inner cannot be distinguished (in 3*a*, "darkness hidden by darkness") and finally presented ambiguously as a form whose cover is imperceptible but whose core may carry the potential for existence (in 3*c*). As Thieme has rightly pointed out, this shape of core and cover describes the form of an egg.[32]

To take stock for a moment, up to this point there is still nothing, or at least nothing much, that has actually happened. All three verses are still located "at that time," "then," and "in the beginning." The most conspicuous development is in the minds of the audience. An unidentified subject has been introduced in vs. 1, then it has taken conceptual shape as the "One" in vs. 2, and finally, in vs. 3, the One has assumed a form: it has become egg-like.

Now, by its very nature, an egg carries with it the promise of further change, and this transformation occurs in 3*d*. Since the One had the form of an egg, it is natural that the power which caused it to be born, or hatched, was heat. This development occurs in vs. 4, although, as usual, it appears implicitly rather than overtly:

kā́mas tád ágre sám avartatā́dhi
mánaso rétaḥ prathamā́ṃ yád āsīt
sató bándhum ásati nír avindan
hṛdí pratīṣyā́ kaváyo manīṣā́

Then, in the beginning, from thought there developed desire,
which existed as the primal semen.
Searching in their hearts through inspired thinking,
poets found the connection of the existent in the non-existent.

The verse again moves backwards, overlapping the previous verses, for it too opens "in the beginning." It then describes the emergence of desire from thought. Translations of these lines usually construe *mánasaḥ* as

[26] So A. A. Macdonell, *A Vedic Reader for Students* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 209: "coming into being."

[27] E.g., F. Edgerton, *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), 73: "generative principle"; L. Scherman, *Philosophische Hymnen aus der Rig- und Atharva-Veda-Samhitā* (Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1887), 2: "Das Ungeheuere."

[28] So Maurer ("Reexamination," 224): "germ (of all things)"; and Thieme (*Gedichte*, 66): "Keim."

[29] Also, *ābhú* is echoed in the lines of 6*d* and 7*a* by the verb *ābabhū́va* "came into being," which, especially in a hymn with as many internal references as this one, supports the derivation from *ā* + *bhū*.

[30] Thus, H. Grassmann, *Wörterbuch zum Rig-Veda* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1892 [rpt. 1964]), translates the word as "leer." The term occurs in one other Ṛgvedic hymn, 10.27, in which it probably derives from *a* + *bhū*, as Grassmann suggests, and does mean "empty." In vs. 1*cd*, Indra says: *ánāśirdām ahám asmi prahantā́, satyadhvṛ́taṃ vṛjināyántam ābhúm* "It is I who shall strike away him who does not offer the mixed milk, him who twists the truth, him who deceptively comes empty(-handed)." Cf. also vs. 4.

[31] Cf. the image of *varūthyàm . . . śárma* "sheltering protection" in *ṚV* 5.46.5 and 8.47.10.

[32] *Gedichte*, 67, n. 2. A "cosmic egg" appears as the source of the world in later cosmogonies: cf. *ChU* 3.19.1, which appears to be in part, at least, a reworking of *ṚV* 10.129. Here the world begins in non-being (or in the non-existent) and eventually evolves into an egg, which splits into silver and gold halves. The image of the cosmic egg was probably already known in the *ṚV*. Cf. 10.121.1, where the world begins in a "golden embryo" (*hiraṇyagarbha*), and 10.82.5f.

a genitive "of thought" with *rétaḥ* "semen," which leaves uncertain whether desire comes from thought or thought from desire.[33] That is, is desire the "semen of thought" because it is emitted by thought or because it gives birth to thought? But in any case, this interpretation of the syntax is likely wrong. Although the construction crosses *pāda* boundaries, it is more in accordance with Ṛgvedic diction to construe *mánasaḥ* as an ablative with *ádhi* and to translate "(desire developed) from thought." A parallel expression *mánasó 'dhi* occurs in *ṚV* 7.33.11*ab*: *utáśi . . . urváśyā brahman mánasó 'dhi jātáḥ* "And you, brahman, are born from the thought of Urvaśī." In this interpretation of the syntax, then, 10.129.4 states clearly that thought emitted desire.[34] By concretizing desire as semen, the poem implies that desire is then the origin of all living beings and, by extension, of the world in general. Analogously, in *Īśā Upaniṣad* 8*a*, "semen" is likewise a figure for the origin of the world: *sá páryagāc chukrám akāyám avraṇám* "[The self of the knowing one] has come to the semen, that is without body and without injury."[35]

This introduction of desire and thought in 4*ab* appears abrupt. Before, the poem offered the "One" followed by "heat"; now, suddenly, it presents thought followed by desire. A listener's natural strategy would be to look for some kind of connection between the two sets of terms. One such connection is close at hand: there is an obvious link between the second terms of each set, namely, heat and desire. In an Atharvavedic hymn, the poet seeks to "kindle" love in another person: *yáṃ devāḥ smáram ásiñcann, apsv àntáḥ śośúcānaṃ sahādhyā́, táṃ te tapāmi vá ruṇasya dhármaṇā* "The burning love which the gods have poured within the waters, together with (your) attention (to me), that I kindle for you through an institute of Varuṇa"[36] (*AV* 6.132.1; similarly, vss. 2–5). Further, as Geldner points out, the later Vedic cosmogonies often link desire and heat. He quotes, for example, *TS* 3.1.1.1: *prajā́patir akāmayata prajā́ sṛjeyéti sá tápo 'tapyata* "Prajāpati desired that he would produce offspring. Then he heated himself." This mytheme, that Prajāpati first desired something and then heated himself, is a frequently repeated narrative opening.[37]

If desire corresponds to heat, then the One that precedes heat ought to correspond to the thought that precedes desire. And so it does, for *thought* is the "One." It is the hidden subject that dominates the first three verses. Thought is that which the first verse describes as neither non-existent nor existent: it is not "existent" because it is not a perceptible object, and it is not "non-existent" because it is not absolutely nothing. This explanation is not a new one; in fact, it is probably the oldest interpretation of this verse. After quoting the opening of the hymn, *ŚB* 10.5.3.2 simply and correctly says: *nèva hí sán máno nèvā́sat* "for thought is in no way existent, (and) in no way is it non-existent." Commenting on this passage, Sāyaṇa very reasonably explains: *manaḥ sadrūpaṃ na bhavati ghaṭādivad rūpādimattvābhāvād asac ca na bhavati pratīyamānatvāt* "Thought does not have the character of existing because there is nothing of it that has form or other characteristics like a pot or other object, nor is it not existing because it is capable of being recognized." It is this same "thought" that takes form first as a "One" in vs. 2 and now in vs. 4 appears in full view.[38]

The syntactic strategy of 4*ab* lends particular drama to the revelation of thought as the One. The main clause (underscored below) ends with the phrase *ádhi mánasaḥ* "from thought" and is then followed by the subordinate clause "which existed as the primal semen": *kā́mas tád ágre sám avartatā́dhi | mánaso rétaḥ prathamáṃ yád āśīt*. As noted above, *ádhi mánasaḥ* crosses the boundary between lines *a* and *b*. This is an unexpected and notable shift. Up to this point, and throughout the rest of the hymn, syntactic units follow metrical units in regular and unrelenting order. But here, by extending beyond the metrical division, the main clause breaks that structure. This enjambement creates a focus on the transgressive *mánasaḥ* and marks it as the key word in the hymn and, indeed, the hymn's hidden subject. Further, because it breaks the hymn's established formal and syntactic structure, the construction becomes an icon of the dramatic emergence of thought, whose unambiguous appearance ruptures the ontic and conceptual indistinctness main-

[33] Even if *mánasaḥ* were to be construed with *rétaḥ*, the better reading of the verse would be that desire is produced by thought as the offspring of thought. So Maurer, "Reexamination," 226.

[34] It need hardly be pointed out that the image of desire as semen is also supported by the natural connection between the two.

[35] Cf. P. Thieme, "*Īśopaniṣad* (= *Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā* 40) 1–14," *JAOS* 85 (1965): 94.

[36] Fire is concealed in water (so the *ṚV* calls Agni *apā́ṃ nápāt*, "the child of the waters," in 1.122.4, 6.13.3, 7.34.15, 10.30.14, etc.); therefore, "burning love" is also hidden in waters. An "institute of Varuṇa" is an unbreakable command.

[37] Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda,* ad 10.129.4*a* See Geldner's note for further references.

[38] If an auditor requires a phrase occurring elsewhere in the hymn to complete the ellipsis in vs. 1, that phrase is better *ékam* in 3*d* rather than *sárvam . . . idám* in 3*b*, the implied choice of *ŚB* 10.5.3.1f. As the *ŚB* passage shows, however, the decision is not a critical one since it arrives at the same solution for the identity of that which is neither existent nor non-existent.

tained so far.[39] Finally, note that the poet positions *mánaḥ* "thought" almost in the very center of the hymn. The hymn has seven verses, so vs. 4 is the middle verse, and *mánaḥ*, syntactically connected with line *a* and metrically with line *b*, occupies the center of its first line. The central location of *mánaḥ* likewise functions as a focusing mechanism that marks "thought" as the axis on which this poem turns.

Now we can see why the first three verses do not describe a material evolution but rather evolve an image in the minds of those hearing the hymn. The poet invokes a process of thinking, of developing an idea, and of gradual understanding. From the very beginning, the poem has made its audience reflect and has drawn attention to their own evolving reflection. In vs. 4, the hymn's audience finally discover the reason the poem has done so: the reflection that the hymn forces on them is itself a reflex of the foundational principle. They find that the answer to the implied riddle of the first line—what is it that neither exists nor does not exist?—occurs in their very act of thinking. Thought is revealed as the namable form of the One in vs. 4, but the reality of thought is communicated not just in what the poem says, but even more in what the poem causes its audience to do. Their response, their active mental engagement, mirrors the original power of creation, and their gradually developing understanding recapitulates the process of creation.

The discovery that thought is the first creative activity is confirmed in the remainder of vs. 4. There the hymn says that it was through "inspired thinking"[40] that poets understood the bond between non-existent and existent. It is not difficult to understand why the poets found the connection by means of *manīṣā́* "inspired thinking." Since thought occupies a state between non-existent and existent, it conjoins them. Since the poets' "inspired thinking" is the epitome of thought, they possess the connection between existent and non-existent. Thus, according to the hymn, the ancient poets uncovered the fundamental principle both in what they think and in the fact that they think.

As this reference to the poet's inspired thinking attests, the emphasis on thought ties the hymn to the *hautra* tradition and to the Vedic priesthood more generally. Although *mánaḥ* itself has general application, Watkins[41] has rightly noted that other derivatives of the root *man* specifically characterize the poetic tradition and the work of the Vedic poets. For the *Ṛgveda*, *manīṣā́* is the poets' "inspired thinking"; *ā* + *mnā* means to "memorize and pass down" poetic and priestly traditions; a *mántra* in the *Ṛgveda* is a poetic formula;[42] and *mánman* describes the poet's knowledge. As one example among many, consider *ṚV* 4.5.6*abc*: *idám me agne kíyate pāvakā́minate gurúm bhārā́ṃ ná mánma, bṛhád dadhātha dhṛṣatā́ gabhīrám* "O purifying Fire, how much am I that on me, who does not violate [divine institutes [*dhā́man*), cf. vs. 4], you have forcefully placed this knowledge, like a heavy burden, lofty and deep?" In this verse, the poet claims a *mánman*, an understanding which is a gift of Agni, but which the poet must labor to perfect.[43]

Thought and its expression in speech were the critical concerns of the priestly poets, and the priests' control over them was the basis of their religious authority and status. Consider, for example, *ṚV* 10.71. This hymn belongs to the same stratum of hymns as 10.129, and in it the poet affirms the power of speech and thought and their importance for priests like him. Thus, the poet describes the mastery of thought and speech as the defining bond that unites Vedic priests: *sáktum iva títaünā punánto, yátra dhírā mánasā vā́cam ákrata, átrā sákhāyaḥ sakh yā́ni jānate, bhadraíṣāṃ lakṣmír níhitā́dhi vā̄cí* "Where, like cleaning grain with a sieve, the wise have created speech with their thought, there the (priestly) companions recognize their bonds of companionship. Their fortune-bringing, distinguishing mark is concealed in speech" (10.71.2). Their skill in speech is the "distinguishing mark" that sets priests apart from all others, and their mastery of it secures their well-being.[44] The greater his

[39] I want to thank Stephanie Jamison for her observations on the significance of this enjambement in the narrative progression of the hymn.

[40] On *manīṣā́* "inspired thinking," see P. Thieme, *Kleine Schriften* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1984), 244f. The manifest etymological connection between *mánaḥ* and *manīṣā́* confirms the relationship between them for the audience.

[41] Cf. C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 68ff.

[42] Cf. Watkins, 88.

[43] Cf. Watkins, 73.

[44] The poet of *ṚV* 1.20.2 locates the success of the Ṛbhus, who are both divine mastercraftsmen and priests, in their control of the tools of thought and speech: *yá índrāya vacoyújā, tatakṣúr mánasā hárī, śámībhir yajñám āśata* "Who by their thinking fashioned the two bay horses, yoked to speech, for Indra, they attained the sacrifice through their ritual labors." Cf. *ṚV* 9.68.5*a*, which is addressed to Soma, who also has the functions of a divine priest: *sáṃ dákṣeṇa mánasā jāyate kavír* "He is born as a poet with skill and thinking"; and also *ṚV* 5.42.4, in which the poet asks that Indra, by the god's own thinking, grant him cows, patrons, well-being, divine favor, and "the holy composition that is placed among the gods" (*bráhmaṇā devá-hitaṃ yád ásti*).

accomplishment in thought and speech, the greater the priest. Toward the conclusion of the hymn, the poet refers to priestly competition[45] and the necessity of quick thinking and clever composition to win: *hṛdā́ taṣṭéṣu mánaso javéṣu, yád brāhmaṇā́ḥ saṃyájante sákhāyaḥ, átrā́ha tvaṃ ví jahur vedyā́bhir, óhabrahmāṇo ví caranty u tve* "When the priestly composers, although companions, ritually contest one another in their swift (creations) of thought, which are fashioned in the heart, then they leave behind the one, in accordance with their aspirations, and (those) others pull ahead by means of their compositions of praise" (vs. 8). Thus, by presenting thought as the ultimate creative activity, *ṚV* 10.129 reflects the reality of the priestly poets, who live through thought, and it elevates their power to create poetry over all other powers.

One final note before we move on. *ṚV* 4.5.6, quoted above, is particularly interesting because it characterizes the poet's knowledge as "deep," *gabhīrá*. This is a fairly common description of the poet's thought or words. The Aśvins are addressed as *kávī gámbhīracetasā* "poets of deep thought" in 8.8.2*d*. Likewise 5.85.1*ab* speaks of a composition (*bráhman*) that is "lofty and deep" (*bṛhát . . . gabhīrám*), and 1.24.9*b* of "good thinking" (*sumatí*) that is "wide and deep" (*urví gabhīrā́*). "Deep" was one of the few stated characteristics of the unexpressed subject of vs. 1: *gáhanaṃ gabhīrám* "Deep (was) the depth." Its association with the vocabulary of poetic knowledge and composition makes *gabhīrá*, placed in the marked position at the very end of vs. 1, the first subtle hint of the presence of thought at the beginning of things.

In vs. 5, the initial opposition of non-existent and existent stated in vs. 1 is made the model for a series of oppositions:

tiraścíno vítato raśmír eṣām
adháḥ svid āsī̀3d upári svid āsī3t
retodhā́ āsan mahimā́na āsan
svadhā́ avástāt práyatiḥ parástāt

Their cord was stretched across:
Did something exist below it? Did something exist above?
There were placers of semen and there were powers.
There was inherent force below, offering above.

The primary opposition is that between male and female, implicit particularly in lines *cd*.[46] It is especially evident in the *retodhā́ḥ* "placers of semen," which are male forms or principles,[47] and the *mahimā́naḥ* "powers," or more literally "greatnesses," which suggest pregnancies.[48] The second pair in 5*d* is more obscure, but because of the obvious sexual reference of the first pair, it surely also represents a sexual complementarity. The arrangement of terms in 5*cd* is probably chiasmic, so that in *d* the first term, *svadhā́* "inherent force," represents a female principle and the second, *práyati* "offering,"[49] a male principle.[50] The implication is that once these productive pairs are established, then they will give rise to the multiplicity of the created world.

Notice further that the crucial terms in *c* and *d* derive from previous verses. The *retodhā́ḥ* recalls the *rétaḥ*, the semen which is desire in 4*b*, and the *mahimā́naḥ* recover the *mahimán*, the "power" of heat in 3*d*. The *svadhā́* reaches back to 2*c* and the "inherent force" of thought, and *práyatiḥ* is a verbal echo of *paró yát* "which is beyond" at the end of 1*b*, again describing thought.[51] The succession of the four terms in vs. 5 thus creates a regressive, ordered sequence of references to vs. 4, then vs. 3, vs. 2, and vs. 1. This structure is an icon of the poem's meaning: it suggests that multiplicity ultimately derives from the fundamental principle of thought and the first manifestation of thought, namely, desire. Thus, even while vs. 5 moves the imagery of the hymn forward toward multiplicity and manifestation, its rhetorical strategy

[45] This competition may well have been a verbal contest. For a further exploration of such contests, see F. B. J. Kuiper, "The Ancient Aryan Verbal Contest," *IIJ* 4 (1960): 217–81.

[46] The recognition of a male and female opposition by the hymn's hearers is assured by the frequent appearance of a primal male and female pair in Vedic cosmogonies. For example, Heaven and Earth quite naturally appear as the primal parents, as in *ṚV* 1.164.33*ab*: *dyaúr me pitā́ janitā́ nā́bhir átra, bándhur me mātā́ pṛthivī́ mahī́yám* "Heaven is my father, my birth-giver; my navel is there. This great Earth here is my mother, my connection."

[47] Cf. *ŚB* 4.4.2.16 [*VS* 8.10]: *prajā́patir vṛ́ṣāsi rétodhā réto máyi dhehi* "You are Prajāpati, the bull. As the placer of semen, place semen in me."

[48] Thieme, *Gedichte*, 67 and 68 n. 5.

[49] The controversy over the derivation of this word is unresolved and likely unresolvable. Either it derives from *pra* + *yat* in the meaning "impulse" or "effort" (Maurer, "Reexamination," 232) or from *pra* + *yam*. I follow Oldenberg (*Noten*, ad loc.) in choosing the latter. Again, however, the choice is not critical to the construction or sense of the verse, since in either case it can be taken to represent a gendered principle.

[50] Cf. Edgerton, *Beginnings*, 73, n. 3.

[51] The association between *práyati* and *paró yát* is not as obvious as the others, but given that *retodhā́*, *mahimán*, and *svadhā́* in 5*cd* have clear connections with earlier terms, people hearing the hymn would expect such a link for *práyati* as well. Moreover, *parástāt*, which follows *práyati*, forms a point of articulation between *práyati* in 5*d* and *paró yát* in 1*b*, for it is joined to *práyati* by sequence and alliteration and to *paráḥ* by form and etymology.

draws attention backward both to the beginning of the hymn and to the beginning of things. Its words preserve a reference to the original One, even as they suggest a process of multiplication.

Other Vedic cosmogonies also follow a creative progression from single thought to multiple objects. Frequently in these, however, words function as mediating constituents between thought and objects. There are many examples, but one in which the role of speech is particularly central is *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.244:

> prajāpatir vā idam agre āsīt | nānyaṃ dvitīyaṃ paśyamānas tasya vāg eva svam āsīd vāg dvitīyā sa aikṣata hantemāṃ vācaṃ visṛje | iyaṃ vāvedaṃ visṛṣṭā sarvaṃ vibhavanty eṣyatīti
>
> Now, this (world) existed as Prajāpati at the beginning. Seeing that there was no second, other (than him)—but his speech did exist as something belonging to him; his speech was a second—he reflected, "Look, I am going to release this speech. Now, this (speech), once released, will continue to develop into all this (world)."

Here Prajāpati thinks and speaks, and finally states that this speech will become the source of the world.[52] Similarly in a narrative based on *ṚV* 10.129, *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 1.23.1 identifies the development from thought to desire to speech to creation as the hymn's essential trajectory:

> *ā́po vā́ idám āsant salílam evá | sá prajā́patir ékaḥ puṣkaraparṇé sámabhavat | tásyā́ntar mánasi kā́maḥ sámavartata | idáṁ sṛjeyam íti | tásmād yát púruṣo mánasābhigácchati | tád vācā́ vadati | tát kármaṇā karoti | tád eṣā́bhyánūktā*
>
> Now, this (world) existed as the waters, only an ocean. Then Prajāpati came into being, alone, on a lotus leaf. A desire arose in his thought that he would bring forth this (world). Therefore, what a person conceives in his thought, that he says in his speaking and that he does in his doing. Therefore, this (verse) [*ṚV* 10.129.4] is recited.

This version of creation reconfigures *ṚV* 10.129, synthesizing it with other cosmogonies that give prominence to the role of speech.[53]

The hymn itself does not make explicit reference to speech, although there are implicit references to words and their creative power.[54] The verbal repetitions in this verse pointed out above draw attention to words themselves and thereby to the act of speaking. The presence in vss. 4 and 5 of the *kavís*, who are not just thinkers but poets, suggests the intimate connection of thought and word. Sound also plays a significant role in this hymn. In a perceptive analysis, T. J. Elizarenkova observes that repetitions of sounds are associated with basic themes of the hymn.[55] She identifies three major patterns: the repetition of the negatives *ná*, *an-*, *a-*, echoed in */na/*, */nā/*, */ma/*, and */mā/*; of forms of *as* "exist," echoed in */as/* and */aś/*; and of interrogatives with initial *k-*, echoed in other words with initial or medial */k/*. The interwoven pattern of the sounds thus iconically presents the interweaving of negation, existence, and questioning that thematically dominates the hymn. The significant patterning of sound again points to the natural manifestation of thought in sound, and brings words into the process of creation.

However, the hymn only implies the course of creation and only hints at the role of thought in it. It does not come to a final resolution, but ends with questions:

> *kó addhā́ veda ká ihá prá vocat*
> *kúta ā́jātā kúta iyáṃ vísṛṣṭiḥ*
> *arvā́g devā́ asyá visárjanenā́-*
> *thā kó veda yáta ābabhū́va*
>
> Who really knows? Who shall here proclaim it?—
> from where was it born, from where this creation?
> The gods are on this side of the creation of this world.
> So then who does know from where it came to be?
>
> *iyáṃ vísṛṣṭir yáta ābabhū́va,*
> *yádi vā dadhé yádi vā ná*
> *yó asyā́dhyakṣaḥ paramé vyòman,*
> *só aṅgá veda yádi vā ná véda*

---

[52] Similarly, in *BU* 1.2, Death, who acts the creator in this passage, produces thought and speech, from which a spoken word then arises (§4). From this actualized speech the various forms of ritual speech emerge, and then finally sacrifices, humans, and cattle are born (§5).

[53] Cf. *ṚV* 10.125, in which speech appears as the fundamental principle embracing the whole world and all the gods. In vs. 7, Speech seems to describe its own cosmogonic power: *aháṃ suve pitáram asya mūrdhán, máma yónir apsv àntáḥ samudré* "I give birth to the father at its [heaven's?] head. My womb is within the waters in the ocean." The details of this half-verse are unclear to me, but the implication is that Speech is really the mother and father of the world.

[54] G. Thompson, in "The *Brahmodya* and Vedic Discourse," *JAOS* 117 (1997): 31, suggests that this hymn has a *brahmodya*-like character that is especially evident in this verse. An implied reference to a *brahmodya* would be apposite to the purposes of the hymn, since *brahmodya*s were verbal contests in which priests challenged the ability of other priests to know ritual truths and to articulate them appropriately. As such, they emphasized the mastery of thought and speech.

[55] *Language and Style of the Vedic Ṛṣis* (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1995), 142f.

This creation—from where it came to be,
if it was produced or if not—
he who is the overseer of this world in the highest heaven,
he surely knows. Of if he does not know . . . ?

Very pointed is the opening of vs. 6, in which the poet asks who knows (*veda*) or who will proclaim (*prá vocat*) the origin of things. Neither human knowledge nor speech, even if they are reflexes of the primal creative power, can capture that origin. Such open-endedness is surprising, but it is not unique to this hymn.[56] Other late Ṛgvedic hymns also pose unanswered questions. So, for example, in words reminiscent of the closing verses of 10.129, the poet of *ṚV* 1.185 begins by asking about the origins of the primordial parents, Heaven and Earth, although clearly his questions expect no answers: 1.185.1*ab*: *katarā́ pū́rvā katarā́parāyóḥ, kathā́ jāté kavayaḥ kó ví veda* "Which of these two was the first? Which was the later? How were they born, o poets? Who knows?"[57] In this case, the answers were even beyond the priestly poets.[58]

But in 10.129 the open question operates somewhat differently. By making its listeners reflect, the hymn causes them to recover the fundamental creative principle, thought itself. It does not offer a detailed picture of the origin of things nor describe the nature or agent of primordial thought, because to do so would defeat its own purposes. For if its function is to create thinking through questioning, then the poem must avoid a final resolution which would bring an end to questioning and an end to thought. Just as the poem begins with something between existent and non-existent, it must leave its readers between knowledge and ignorance. Thus, the openness of the poem points to the process of thinking as an approximate answer to the unanswerable riddle about the origin of things.

Such a strategy was not continued in the later literature that concerns this hymn. Later commentaries and reworkings of the hymn fashion from it a much more certain picture of the beginnings of the world. They do so, not because the later writers were somehow less subtle or less intelligent or less inspired than the poet, but because the conventions of the texts they composed required them to do so. One purpose of ancient commentary was to expound and to clarify, and thus to close the text.[59] Inevitably, therefore, commentaries on *ṚV* 10.129 create a distinct picture of the origins of things, even though the poem itself resists such clarity and is even undermined by it.

This process of interpretively closing texts began early in the Vedic tradition. So, for example, in each of its first nine verses, *ṚV* 10.121 describes the deity that creates the world and then asks, in refrain, the identity of that god: *kásmai devā́ya havíṣā vidhema* "To which god should we bring worship with our offering?" In the last verse, which scholarly consensus recognizes as secondary,[60] that god is identified as Prajāpati. The poet who added the final verse took an open identification and closed it. Later traditions extended that closure into the remainder of the hymn by interpreting the interrogative pronoun *ká* "who?" as a name of Prajāpati.[61]

In a similar way, the version of *ṚV* 10.129 that appears in *TB* 2.8.9.3–7 also closes that text. The seven verses of the hymn and two additional verses that follow comprise the recitations for the nine *upahoma*s, or additional oblations, at an animal sacrifice for the attainment of heaven. According to *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 19.16.23, these nine verses comprise the *salilasūkta*.[62] Although it includes the verses of *ṚV* 10.129, this *salilasūkta* differs significantly from the Ṛgvedic hymn precisely because of what the additional verses do to its interpretation.

The first of the two additional verses is reminiscent of 10.129, for it continues the questioning of 10.129.6–7 and even recalls the diction of the opening of the hymn:

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[56] Cf. Thompson, 22; and Elizarenkova, 142.

[57] Cf. also *ṚV* 10.31.7, which likewise asks unanswerable questions about the primal stuff out of which Heaven and Earth were fashioned.

[58] It may even be dangerous to challenge these limits, as Yājñavalkya warns Gārgī in *BU* 3.6: *gārgi mā 'tiprākṣīḥ | mā te mūrdhā vyapaptat | anatipraśnyāṃ vai devatām atipṛcchasi | gārgi mā 'tiprākṣīr iti* "Gārgī, do not question beyond, so that your head should not fly apart. Now, you are questioning beyond the divine power that is not to be questioned beyond. Gārgī, do not question beyond." On the dangers of thinking beyond one's capacities or beyond what is possible, see M. Witzel, "The Case of the Shattered Head," *StII* 13–14 (1987): 363–415; and S. Insler, "The Shattered Head Split and the Epic Tale of Śakuntalā," *BEI* 7–8 (1989–90): 97–139.

[59] Although only to some degree. The many creation narratives that are based wholly or partially on *ṚV* 10.129 arose in a context that did not require a single creation story. Finality might be achieved within an individual text, but the cosmogonic corpus remained open.

[60] E.g., Edgerton, *Beginnings*, 69; Thieme, *Gedichte*, 69; Oldenberg, *Noten*, ad loc.

[61] Cf. S. Lévi, *La Doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brāhmaṇas* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1898), 17.

[62] P.-E. Dumont, "The Kāmya Animal Sacrifices in the *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa*," *PAPS* 113 (1969): 65, n. 13.

kím svid vánaṃ ká u sá vṛkṣá āsīt
yáto dyāvāpṛthivī́ niṣṭatakṣúḥ
mánīṣiṇo mánasā pṛcchátéd u tát
yád adhyátiṣṭhad bhúvanāni dhāráyan

What was the wood and what was the tree,
from which they carved out heaven and earth.
O you of inspired thinking, through your thought ask
on what he stood as he supported the worlds.[63]

The verse goes beyond *ṚV* 10.129 in forming a more concrete image of the origins of creation, but it does still question and does still emphasize thinking. However, the final verse marks a decisive shift:

bráhma vánaṃ bráhma sá vṛkṣá āsīt
yáto dyāvāpṛthivī́ niṣṭatakṣúh
mánīṣiṇo mánasā víbravīmi vaḥ
bráhmādhyátiṣṭhad bhúvanāni dhāráyan

The holy composition (*bráhman*) was the wood and the holy composition was the tree,
from which they carved out heaven and earth.
O you of inspired thinking, through my thought I will explain to you:
on the holy composition he stood as he supported the worlds.[64]

Here the text has done what *ṚV* 10.129 so carefully avoided. It has concluded with an answer to the questions about the origins of things by naming a fundamental principle. That principle is the *bráhman*, which is the verbal formulation of the truth.[65] Thematically, this answer keeps alive the centrality of thought and speech, but, like the final verse of *ṚV* 10.121, it also creates a closed text with a determinant answer. The recomposition of *ṚV* 10.129 in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* thus reflects the impulse to resolve.

To summarize, then, the central metaphor of this hymn is that thought is the original creative principle. The first verses gradually allow that central metaphor to take shape. First the principle is uncategorizable as existent or nonexistent; then it is conceived as a whole, a One; then it assumes a form; and finally it is revealed as thought. As the image develops in the minds of the hymn's audience, they thus recreate the fundamental creative power, the act of thinking, and recapitulate the process of creation. But thought is not the only form of creativity to which the hymn refers. Interwoven throughout the hymn are also references to a wide variety of forms of generation and reproduction. The One has the shape of an egg (vss. 1 and 3) and hatches (vs. 3). In vs. 2, the One is alive—it is "breathing"—but it is alive "without wind," like a plant or an embryo. Similarly the "signless ocean" in vs. 3 may refer to the amniotic fluid in which an embryo rests.[66] And finally the hymn describes sexual reproduction in vss. 4 and 5. Thus all forms of reproduction are ultimately grounded in the creativity of thought.

These connections reflect another basic function of the hymn. In his study, "Edification by Puzzlement," James Fernandez[67] argues that riddles are essentially analogies, and like all analogies, they have "the capacity to establish or suggest connections between experiences within domains and between domains" (p. 49). As such, riddles are cognitively integrating or, in his terms "edifying," for they suggest "a larger integration of things, a larger whole" (p. 50). Like other Vedic enigmas, this hymn has a purpose very like the one Fernandez describes. Thought is the principal metaphor, but through its associations with other forms of creativity, the hymn finally embraces all kinds of birth and therefore the entire living world. The result is a similar sense of the whole, a sense that all forms of production and reproduction and all beings find a point of intersection in the process of thinking.

Fernandez further argues that puzzles may be edifying in a second sense. The orderliness of one domain can structure other more chaotic domains with which it becomes linked. In 10.129, the hymn structures the profusion of creative processes by their symbolic links to thought and speech. The structure of mental life provides the order for all life.

Fernandez' study of riddles also suggests a way of grounding this hymn in a historical context. His work grew out of his research into the Bwiti, a religious movement among the Fang, a people of western equatorial Africa. The sermons of this group are constructed of elaborate riddles that connect the social, economic, and natural spheres. They are "edifying," for they produce a sense of a complete whole and of an ordered whole. The rise of this movement, he says, can be traced to cultural and

[63] *TB* 2.8.9.6. This verse was created by combining parts of two Ṛgvedic verses. Lines *ab* are close variants of *ṚV* 10.31.7*ab* and *cd* are *ṚV* 10.81.4*cd*.

[64] *TB* 2.8.9.7.

[65] Cf. P. Thieme, "Bráhman," *ZDMG* 102 (1952): 91–129 = *Kl. Schriften*, 100–138.

[66] As in *ṚV* 10.121.7*ab*: *ā́po ha yád bṛhatī́r víśvam ā́yan, gárbhaṃ dádhānā janáyantīr agním* "When the deep waters came, carrying everything as an embryo and giving birth to the fire. . . ."

[67] In *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, ed. I. Karp and C. S. Bird (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980) 44–59.

social pressures, which were created by the colonial situation of western Africa. These pressures led to a sense of fragmentation, and therefore it is one of the acknowledged purposes of the movement to return to the integrated world of the ancestors. As a leader of the movement put it, "the world is one thing, but the witches try to isolate people from each other so they can eat them."[68] The sense of the whole and the sense of order created by these sermons function to defeat such evil fragmentation.

ṚV 10.129 belongs to the late *Ṛgveda*, and therefore the social and cultural shifts that mark the middle and late Vedic periods may have already begun.[69] Some of these, like the rise of population centers, may have produced significant dislocations and attenuations of previous social bonds. Also, an evolving social stratification may have resulted in an increasing alienation of social groups from one another. Such processes, or others like them, could have led to a comparable sense of fragmentation. This hymn may be an early response to such circumstances and thus may represent an attempt to recover a sense of life as an ordered whole. Ultimately, in a much more systematic manner, the later upaniṣadic movement and Buddhism addressed similar problems and social realities and followed similar, if more fully realized, methods of solution.

[68] Fernandez, "Edification," 51.

[69] Cf. G. Erdosy, *Urbanisation in Early Historic India*, BAR International Series, vol. 430 (Oxford: BAR, 1988).