Volume 119 / Number 2 / April–June 1999

JOURNAL OF THE

AMERICAN ORIENTAL SOCIETY

Articles

ABDELKADER I. TAYOB, Šabari on the Companions of the Prophet: Moral and Political Contours in Islamic Historical Writing ......................................................... 203

ROBERT D. HOBERMAN and ALEXIS MANASTER RAMER, Sephardic Scansion and Phonological Theory ........ 211

STEPHEN F. DALE and ALAM PAYIND, The Ahrārī Waqf in Kābul in the year 1546
and the Mughāl Naqshbandiyyah .................................................. 218

HERBERT VERRETH, The Egyptian Eastern Border Region in Assyrian Sources ............................................ 234

JOEL P. BRERETON, Edifying Puzzlement: Rgveda 10.129 and the Uses of Enigma ................................... 248


CHARLES HOLCOMBE, Trade-Buddhism: Maritime Trade, Immigration, and the Buddhist Landfall in Early Japan 280

Review Articles

HERMAN L. J. VANSTIPHOUT, A New Edition of Gilgamesh and Akka .......................................................... 293

GEORGE THOMPSON, Riddles and Enigmas .................................................. 297

Brief Communications

CHRISTINE LILYQUIST, On the Amenhotep III Inscribed Faience Fragments from Mycenae .......................... 303

JOHN MAKUJINA, Dismemberment in Dan 2:5 and 3:29 as an Old Persian Idiom, “To Be Made into Parts” .... 309

Reviews of Books .......................................................... 313

Books Received .................................................. 373
EDIFYING PUZZLEMENT: RVEDA 10.129 AND THE USES OF ENIGMA

JOEL P. BRERETON
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI

This paper reconsiders RV 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 RV 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 RV 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, 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 Śāthapatha Brāhmaṇa and the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa and Āranyakas 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 Mahābhārata 12.329.3, and the creation account that opens the Māṇava Dharmaśāstra echoes the hymn, as several of its commentators have recognized.

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: Goldner, Gonda, Oldenberg, Thieme, among many others. 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.


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.” 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.” 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, RV 10.129 is remarkably contrary. 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 7b, yādī và dādhé yādī và nā, 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 3b and 6b, the hymn has been rolling along with regular tristubh after regular tristubh. Then, at almost the end, 7b 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 dādhé, 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, this metrically unresolved cadence is a verbal image of the unresolved cosmogony. Moreover, the metrically incomplete line anticipates the hymn’s syntactically incomplete conclusion, 7d só āṅgā veda yādī và

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).


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

7 That is, read yādī và dādhé yādī và nā *dādhé. Note that the second dādhé “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.
The poem opens with dramatic obscurity:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{násad āsīn nó sād āsīt taddānim} \\
\text{nāśid rájo nó vyōmā parō yāt} \\
\text{kim āvarivaḥ kuha kāśya sārmān} \\
\text{āmbhaḥ kim āsīd gāhānam gābhirām}
\end{align*}
\]

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” (taddānim) when none of the divisions that characterize the world existed. What there was cannot be described as either āsāt “non-existent” nor as sāt “existent.” In many translations, āsāt and sāt are taken as abstract nouns: “non-being” and “being” or “non-existence” and “existence.”

Indeed, this is the interpretation of the oldest commentary on this hymn, ŠB 10.5.3.1: nēva vā idām āgrē 'sād āsīn nēva sād āsīt “In the beginning, this (world) was in no way non-existent, and it was in no way existent.”

The brāhmaṇa supplies a subject for the adjectives “existent” and “non-existent,” namely, idām “this (world).”

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.

---

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 yādi vi vā nā. These echoes draw attention to their connection and thereby accent their common feature, namely, their incompleteness.


11 E.g., H. Oldenberg, *Rgveda: 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 nēva to be a strong rather than a qualified negative ⇒ J. P. Brereton, “The Particle ima,” *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 sārvam . . . idām in line 3b. 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 mid-space 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:

\begin{verbatim}
    nā mṛtyūḥ āśaḥ amṛtam nā tārhi,
    nā rātrīḥā dhana āśit prakṛteḥ
    ānīv avātām svadhāyā tād ēkām,
    tāsmād dhānyaṁ nā parāḥ kim candāsa
\end{verbatim}

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” (tārhi), as vs. 1 described what was “at that time” (taddānīm)—indeed, the two words appear in corresponding positions at the ends of the first lines. Line 2a mimics the negations of āsā and sāt in the negations of mṛtyū “death” and amṛta “deathlessness.”\(^{16}\) In line b, where vs. 1 denies that “mid-space” 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 2ab, if 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, “mid-space” 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 2c, 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 1abc and 2abc results in other correspondences in 1c and 2c. As Geldner\(^{19}\) has pointed out, the answer to the question “what stirred?” (āvartav) in 1c is hidden in 2c. The key to this is the verb āvartav, which can mean “move around,” “move back and forth,” or “stir.”\(^{20}\) On the basis of Vedic parallelism, Geldner showed that āvartav here describes the

\(^{15}\) The end of the line, gāhanam gābhīrām, might be read as a statement (“the depth was deep”) or an independent question (“did there exist a deep depth?”), as well as an epexegetical 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: āpō vā idān āgri salitām āśit “Now, in the beginning, this (world) existed as the waters, an ocean”; and TA 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: āsā ... sāt ... mṛtyūḥ ... amṛtam. The poet employs such chiasmic ordering elsewhere in the hymn as well. See vs. 5cd, below.

\(^{17}\) So P. Thieme, Gedichte aus dem Rig-Veda (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1964), 66. A version of RV 10.129 also occurs at TB 2.8.9.3–5, and, as Geldner (Kosmogonie, 17) notes, Sāyāga’s

---

15 The end of the line, gāhanam gābhīrām, might be read as a statement (“the depth was deep”) or an independent question (“did there exist a deep depth?”), as well as an epexegetical 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: āpō vā idān āgri salitām āśit “Now, in the beginning, this (world) existed as the waters, an ocean”; and TA 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: āsā ... sāt ... mṛtyūḥ ... amṛtam. The poet employs such chiasmic ordering elsewhere in the hymn as well. See vs. 5cd, below.

17 So P. Thieme, Gedichte aus dem Rig-Veda (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1964), 66. A version of RV 10.129 also occurs at TB 2.8.9.3–5, and, as Geldner (Kosmogonie, 17) notes, Sāyāga’s
movement of the wind or breath. Initially in 1c, an implied reference to the wind or breath remains only a possibility, since there might be other things that move back and forth. The confirmation of this interpretation comes in vs. 2, for the movement back and forth in 1c occupies the analogous position to that of the “breathing” of the One in 2c. Thus, the answer to the question, “what stirred?” is the life breath of that One from which the world began.

But if 2c answers the question of 1c, and if indeed the whole of vs. 2 defines what vs. 1 suggests, then the “One” that appears in 2c 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” (tād ēkām). The sā pronoun is ordinarily anaphoric, and if it is so here, then the only thing to which it could refer is the unidentified subject of 1a. 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
tāma āsīt tāmasā gūhām āgre \\
ˈpraketām salīlām sāravām ā idām \\
tuṣṭyenaḥśī ṣuṣṭhitam yād āsīt \\
tāpasas tān mahinḍāyataikām
\end{align*}
\]

Darkness existed, hidden by darkness, in the beginning.

All this was a signless ocean.

When the thing coming into being was concealed by eminness,

then was the One born by the power of heat.

Like the first lines of vss. 1 and 2, line 3a ends with an indicator of time (here āgre “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 nāsad āsīt “the non-existent did not exist” and vs. 2 nā mṛtyur āsīt “death did not exist,” this verse begins tāma āsīt “darkness existed.” The absence of the negative nā is an indication of a change, although this change still leaves the hymn’s audience very much “in the dark.” Or again, in line 3 bpraketām “signless” recovers nā . . . praketāḥ “no sign” in 2b, 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, salīlā, the ocean, which the verse says did exist (āh), recalls the water (āmbhah) that 1d suggests might have existed.

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 nā.

The formal variations and repetitions in 3ab 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” (tāmāḥ . . . tāmāsā gūhām), 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 Rīg-Veda, ad loc. Consider, for example, the verse that occurs as both RV 1.164.31 and as 10.177.3: āpaśyām gopām ānipadāyamānām, ā ca pārā ca pathihiś cārāntam, sā sadhīrīcch sa vīṣṭucīr vāsāna, ā varvarīti bhūvanesv antāh “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 prāṇas 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 Rīg-Veda, ad loc., citing Sāyana).

22 Citing TĀ 5.6.4. Sāyana 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 RV 10.166.3; 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.


25 The opening repetition tāmāḥ . . . tāmāsā also recalls the closing gāhānām gābhirām of vs. 1.
Just as in vs. 2c, where indefinite and negative descriptions are interrupted by the appearance of the One, so in 3c there appears something called an ābhū, 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 noun28—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 2c, the One suddenly emerged, and therefore we would expect there to be a something at the corresponding position in 3c.29 On the other hand, in vs. 3 the ābhū is described as concealed in emptiness, just as darkness is hidden 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 ābhū would be more appropriate.30 Thus the possibilities for interpreting ābhū 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 3a and 3c, further recall another image in 1c. 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 1c), then described paradoxically as a form whose outer and inner cannot be distinguished (in 3a, “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 3c). 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 3d. 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:

kāmas tād āgre sām avartatādhi
mānasā rētaḥ prathamām yād āsit
satō bāṇḍhum āsati nir avīdān
ḥṛtī pratiṣyā kavāyo maṇiśā
dasati manīṣā

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 mānasāḥ as

28 So Maurer (“Reexamination,” 224): “germ (of all things)”;
and Thieme (Gedichte, 66): “Keim.”
29 Also, ābhū is echoed in the lines of 6d and 7a by the verb ābahāva “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 [pt. 1964]), translates the word as “leer.” The term occurs in one other Rgvedic hymn, 10.27, in which it probably derives from a + bhū, as Grassmann suggests, and does mean “empty.” In vs. 1cd, Indra says: ānāśīrdām ahām asmi prahāntā, satyadhīptaṃ vṛjīnāyantām ābhūm “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 varāhyām...śārma “sheltering protection” in RV 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 RV 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 RV Cf. 10.121.1, where the world begins in a “golden embryo” (hirṇyagarbha), and 10.82.5f.
a genitive “of thought” with rétah “semen,” which leaves uncertain whether desire comes from thought or thought from desire.\footnote{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 Rgvedic diction to construe mánasāh as an ablative with ādhi and to translate “(desire developed) from thought.” A parallel expression mánaso ‘dhi occurs in RV 7.33.11ab: utási . . . urvāṣyā brahman mánaso ‘dhi jātah “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.\footnote{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 Kā Upaniṣad 8a, “semen” is likewise a figure for the origin of the world: sā páryogāc chukrām akāyām avaraṇām “[The self of the knowing one] has come to the semen, which is not with body and without injury.”\footnote{35}

This introduction of desire and thought in 4ab 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: vāṃ devāh smāram ṣāśīn-cann, apsv āntāḥ śośucānāṃ sahādhāyā, tām te tapāṁ vā ruṇāṣya dhārmānā “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”\footnote{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: prajāpatir akāmāyata prajā śrjevēti sā tápo ‘tayata “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.\footnote{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, SB 10.5.3.2 simply and correctly says: nēva hi sān máno nēvāsat “for thought is in no way existent, (and) in no way is it non-existent.” Commenting on this passage, Sāyaṇa very reasonably explains: manaḥ sadrāpaṁ na bhavati ghatādvad rāpādīmattvābhāvād asac ca na bhavati prattyamāṇatvāt “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.\footnote{38}

The syntactic strategy of 4ab lends particular drama to the revelation of thought as the One. The main clause (underscored below) ends with the phrase ādhi mánasāh “from thought” and is then followed by the subordinate clause “which existed as the primal semen”: kānasād tād āgre sām avartatādhī | mánasā rétah prathamām yād āsīt. As noted above, ādhi mánasāh 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 enjambment creates a focus on the transgressive mánasāh 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-

\footnotetext[33]{33} Even if mánasāh were to be construed with rétah, the better reading of the verse would be that desire is produced by thought as the offspring of thought. So Maurer, “Reexamination,” 226. \footnotetext[34]{34} It need hardly be pointed out that the image of desire as semen is also supported by the natural connection between the two. \footnotetext[35]{35} Cf. P. Thieme, “Isopaniṣad (= Vājasaneyi-Samhitā 40) 1–14,” JAOS 85 (1965): 94. \footnotetext[36]{36} Fire is concealed in water (so the RV calls Agni apām 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. \footnotetext[37]{37} Geldner, Der Rig-Veda, ad 10.129.4a See Geldner’s note for further references. \footnotetext[38]{38} If an auditor requires a phrase occurring elsewhere in the hymn to complete the ellipsis in vs. 1, that phrase is better ēkam in 3d rather than sāravam . . . īdām in 3b, the implied choice of SB 10.5.3.1f. As the SB 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. Finally, note that the poet positions *mānah* “thought” almost in the very center of the hymn. The hymn has seven verses, so vs. 4 is the middle verse, and *mānah*, syntactically connected with line *a* and metrically with line *b*, occupies the center of its first line. The central location of *mānah* 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 evoke 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 nammable 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” 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 *manisā* “inspired thinking.” Since thought occupies a state between non-existent and existent, it conjoins them. Since the poets’ “inspired thinking” is the epitone 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 *mānah* itself has general application, Watkins has rightly noted that other derivatives of the root *man* specifically characterize the poetic tradition and the work of the Vedic poets. For the *Rgveda*, *manisā* is the poet’s “inspired thinking”; a *āmn* means to “memorize and pass down” poetic and priestly traditions; a *māntra* in the *Rgveda* is a poetic formula; and *mānman* describes the poet’s knowledge. As one example among many, consider RV 4.5.6ab: idām me agne kiṣyate pāvakāminate gūrūṁ bharāṁ nā māṇaṁ, bhūdād dādhāthā dhrṣṭātā ga-bhirām “O purifying Fire, how much am I that on me, who does not violate [divine institutes [dhāman], cf. vs. 4], you have forcefully placed this knowledge, like a heavy burden, lofty and deep?” In this verse, the poet claims a *mānman*, an understanding which is a gift of Agni, but which the poet must labor to perfect.

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, RV 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: sāktum iva rītāṁ punānto, yātra dhīrā māṇasā vācam akṛta, dvātṛ śāhāyāh sakh yāṁ jñāte, bhadraśīmā lakṣmīr niḥāīdhi vāci “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. The greater his

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

40 On *manisā* “inspired thinking,” see P. Thieme, Kleine Schriften (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1984), 244f. The manifest etymological connection between *mānah* and *manisā* confirms the relationship between them for the audience.

43 Cf. Watkins, 73.
44 The poet of RV 1.20.2 locates the success of the Rāhus, who are both divine mastercraftsmen and priests, in their control of the tools of thought and speech: yā indrāya vacayoja, tatakeṣur mánasā hāri, śāmibhir yajñāṁ āśata “Who by their thinking fashioned the two bay horses, yoked to speech, for Indra, they attained the sacrifice through their ritual labors.” Cf. RV 9.68.5a, which is addressed to Soma, who also has the functions of a divine priest: sām dáśesa mánasā jñāte kavī “He is born as a poet with skill and thinking”; and also RV 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” (brāhmaṇā devāhitam yād āsti).
accomplishment in thought and speech, the greater the priest. Toward the conclusion of the hymn, the poet refers to priestly competition and the necessity of quick thinking and clever composition to win: hrdaya taṣṭēva mānaso javēṣu, yād brāhmaṇāḥ samāyajante sākhāyah, ātrāhā ivām vi jahur vedāyibhir, ohabrahmāno vi carany 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, RV 10.129 reflects the reality of the priestly poets, who live through thought, and it elevates their power to create poetry over all other things.

One final note before we move on. RV 4.5.6, quoted above, is particularly interesting because it characterizes the poet’s knowledge as “deep,” gabhīrā. This is a fairly common description of the poet’s thought or words. The Aśvins are addressed as kāvi gāmbhiracetasā “poets of deep thought” in 8.8.2d. Likewise 5.85.1ab speaks of a composition (brāhmaṇ) that is “lofty and deep” (bhratā . . . gabhīrām), and 1.24.9b of “good thinking” (sumati) that is “wide and deep” (uvṛt gabhīrā). “Deep” was one of the few stated characteristics of the unexpressed subject of vs. 1: gāhanaṃ gabhīrām “Deep (was) the depth.” Its association with the vocabulary of poetic knowledge and composition makes gabhīrā, 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 all 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:

tiraścāno viśta rāṣmīr eṣām
adhāḥ svid āśād adipāryi svid āśiṣt
retodhā āśan mahimāna āśan
svadhā avāsthāt prāyatiḥ parāsthāt

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. It is especially evident in the retodhā “placers of semen,” which are male forms or principles, and the mahimāna “powers,” or more literally “greatnesses,” which suggest pregnancies. The second pair in 5d 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 5cd is probably chiasmic, so that in d the first term, svadhā “inherent force,” represents a female principle and the second, prāyati “offering,” a male principle. 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 retodhā recalls the rétaḥ, the semen which is desire in 4b, and the mahimāna recover the mahimān, the “power” of heat in 3d. The svadhā reaches back to 2c and the “inherent force” of thought, and prāyatiḥ is a verbal echo of paró yāt “which is beyond” at the end of 1b, again describing thought. 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

Heaven and Earth quite naturally appear as the primal parents, as in RV 1.164.33ab: dyāir me pītā janatā nābhīr ātra, bandhur me mātā prthivī mahīyām “Heaven is my father, my birth-giver; my navel is there. This great Earth here is my mother, my connection.”

47 Cf. SB 4.4.2.16 [VS 8.10]: prajāpatir vyāsa rétodhā réto mayi 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,” 233) 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 prāyati and paró yāt is not as obvious as the others, but given that retodhā, mahimān, and svadhā in 5cd have clear connections with earlier terms, people hearing the hymn would expect such a link for prāyati as well. Moreover, parāsthāt, which follows prāyati, forms a point of articulation between prāyati in 5d and paró yāt in 1b, for it is joined to prāyati by sequence and alliteration and to parāḥ 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 pro-
gression from single thought to multiple objects. Fre-
quently 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 Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa 2.244:

prajāpati vā idam agre āṣīt | nāṇyām dvitiyaṃ paśya-
mānas tasya vāg eva svam āsis vāg dvitiyā sa aikṣata
hantemāṃ vācam visṛṣṭi | ivaṃ vāvedaṃ visṛṣṭa sarvaṃ
vibhavanto eṣyatā

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. Similarly
in a narrative based on RV 10.129, Taittirīya Āranyakā
1.23.1 identifies the development from thought to desire
to speech as creation as the hymn’s essential trajectory:

āpo vā idām āsant saṅgam evā | sā prajāpatā ekāh
puṣkaraparam sāmabhavati | tasyāntar mānasī kāmah sā-
mavartata | idām sṛṣyam iťi | tāṁśād yāt pūrasyo māna-
sābhīgacchati | tād vācā vadañi | tāt kārmanā karoti | tād
ēśābhīnyākātā

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) [RV 10.129.4] is recited.

This version of creation reconfigures RV 10.129, synthe-
sizing 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 them-

52 Similarly, in BU 1.2, Death, who acts the creator in this pas-
sage, 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. RV 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: ahām suve

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 brahmodyas were verbal contests in which
priests challenged the ability of other priests to know ritual
truths and to articulate them appropriately. As such, they empha-
sized the mastery of thought and speech.

55 Language and Style of the Vedic Rṣis (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 RV 1.185 begins by asking about the
origins of the primordial parents, Heaven and Earth, 
although clearly his questions expect no answers: 1.185.1ab:
katará púrvá katarásparāyóh, kathá jātē kavyah kó vi
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 prin-
ciple, thought itself. It does not offer a detailed picture of
the origin of things nor describe the nature or agent of pri-
ordial 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 be-
tween knowledge and ignorance. Thus, the openness of
the poem points to the process of thinking as an approx-
imate 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 re-

56 Cf. Thompson, 22; and Elizarenkova, 142.
57 Cf. also RV 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 Yā-
jñavalkya warns Gārgī in BU 3.6: gārgī mā ‘tiprāksīh | mā te
mārdhā vyappat | anapatraśyām vai devatām atiprcchasi |
 gārgī mā ‘tiprāksīr 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 asked 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
workings of the hymn fashion from it a much more cer-
tain 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 In-
evitably, therefore, commentaries on RV 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, RV 10.121 describes the deity that
creates the world and then asks, in refrain, the identity of
that god: kāsmāi devāya havīsa vidhema “To which god
should we bring worship with our offering?” In the last
verse, which scholarly consensus recognizes as second-
ary,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
remains of the hymn by interpreting the interrogative
pronoun kā “who?” as a name of Prajāpati.61

In a similar way, the version of RV 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 upahomas, or additional obla-
tions, 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 in-
cludes the verses of RV 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 dictum of the opening of the hymn:

of the Shattered Head,” Stil 13–14 (1987): 363–415; and S. Ins-
ler, “The Shattered Head Split and the Epic Tale of Śakuntalā,”
59 Although only to some degree. The many creation nar-
ratives that are based wholly or partially on RV 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 Brāhmanas
(Paris: E. Leroux, 1898), 17.
62 P.-E. Dumont, “The Kāmya Animal Sacrifices in the Tait-
kīṁ svād vānam kā u sā vṛksā āśīt
yāto dyāvaprithivī niṣṭātakṣāh
māṇiṣiṇo māṇasā prachātēd u tāt
yād adhyātīśhād bhūvanāni dharāyān

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 RV 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:

brāhma vānam brāhma sā vṛksā āśīt
yāto dyāvaprithivī niṣṭātakṣāh
māṇiṣiṇo māṇasā vibhravīmi vah
brāhma dhātisvādh bhūvanāni dharāyān

The holy composition (brāhma) 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 RV 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 brāhma, 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 RV 10.121, it also creates a
closed text with a determinant answer. The recomposition
of RV 10.129 in the Taṇṭānaṇa 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 uncategories as existent or non-
existent; 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
Fernandez67 argues that riddles are essentially analogies,
and like all analogies, they have “the capacity to establish
or suggest connections between experiences within do-
 mains 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 be-
comes linked. In 10.129, the hymn structures the profu-
sion of creative processes by their symbolic links to
thought and speech. The structure of mental life provides
the order for all life.

Fernandez’s 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 move-
ment among the Fang, a people of western equatorial
Africa. The sermons of this group are constructed of elab-
orate riddles that connect the social, economic, and natu-
ral 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 Rgvedic verses. Lines ab are close variants of RV 10.31.7ab
and cd are RV 10.81.4cd.
64 TB 2.8.9.7.
KL. Schriften, 100–138.
66 As in RV 10.121.7ab: āpo ha yād brhaṭr vīśvam dyan, gār-
bam dāḍhānā janāyanīt anāgīm “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
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.

\textit{RV} 10.129 belongs to the late \textit{Rgveda}, 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.

\footnote{68 Fernandez, “Edification,” 51.}