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Is There a Root of Being? Indic Philosophies and the Parmenidean Problem

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Abstract: This article is a survey of various philosophical schools, focusing primarily on South Asian ones, and how they address the problem of being and nonbeing. The early Greek poet Parmenides stated that nonbeing is something that we cannot actually conceptualize and, thus, cannot speak of meaningfully. Plato and Aristotle are two examples of Western philosophers who came up with different ways of resolving the issue. As we turn to Indic schools of philosophy, we encounter a colorful array of different approaches. The Upanishads gave rise to a variety of points of view, though the Advaita Vedānta school of Adi Śaṅkara has dominated the discussion over the last few centuries. Other schools represented in this survey are Sāṃkhya, Buddhism (Therāvada, Sarvāstivāda, Sautantrika, Yogācāra, and Mādhyamaka), Vaiśeṣika, and Nyāya. Unsurprisingly, each comes up with different constructs that are frequently mutually exclusive, despite efforts by some writers to look past some obvious differences that are not reconcilable. There are also some conceptual similarities with Western philosophy, but the different cultural backdrops limit the ability to easily transfer ideas from one context to the other. My method is to quote short passages from the central writings (usually the "official" sutras) and show how they fit into their particular systems.

Keywords: being; nonbeing; Hindu; Buddhist; Sāṃkhya; Vedānta; Nyāya; Therāvada; Brahman; Puruṣa

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1. Introduction: Parmenides and Some Classical Responses

When Alfred North Whitehead wrote his celebrated assertion that "the history of European philosophy consisted of a series of footnotes to Plato," he listed among Plato's advantages that he had inherited a tradition that had not yet been "stiffened by excessive systematization" (Whitehead 1979, p. 39). It is not entirely clear at what point a system of philosophical writings could have become so overly structured as to paralyze it, and Plato, as innovative as he was, certainly interacted with his predecessors and contemporaries. In light of the fact that one of his last dialogs depicted an encounter (possibly fictitious) between Socrates and Parmenides, he must have been acquainted with Parmenides and his thoughts to some extent (Hamilton and Cairns 1963, pp. 920–56). Parmenides, of course, is famous for some lines of a lengthy poem:

> Come now, I will tell thee . . . the only two ways of search that can be thought of. The first, namely, that It is, and that it is impossible for it not to be, is the way of belief, for truth is its companion. The other, namely, that It is not, and that it must needs not be—that is the path that none can learn of at all. ("Fragments 4–5", Burnett 1948, p. 173)

Plato's response to Parmenides is not to find an ingenious way to give ontological status to nonbeing, but to utilize nonbeing as a means of differentiating individuals from each other. For example, when he declared in the dialog *Phaedo* (Hamilton and Cairns 1963, p. 84) that Forms come and go only as completely present or completely absent, he must have been thinking of Parmenides and his verdict that there was no middle ground between being and nonbeing.

In his example in the *Phaedo*, Plato mentions three persons: Phaedo, who is taller than Simmias, who, in turn, is taller than Socrates. The point of that comparison is to show that when Simmias is in the presence of Phaedo, he participates completely in the Form of Shortness. However, if we focus on Simmias and Socrates, the Form of Shortness disappears from him instantaneously and is replaced by the Form of Tallness. Individuals are distinguished from each other in a binary mode: either one participates in a Form or not. Nonbeing is strictly relative to the situation and does not exist per se; it indicates whether a Form is present or absent.

Aristotle responded to the Parmenidean puzzle by dividing being and nonbeing into three categories. Being is something actual; it exists as a substance due to the four causes. Nonbeing is never actual. However, there are two kinds of nonbeing. Absolute nonbeingrefers to anything for which it is impossible to exist, either because it is self-contradictory or represents a physical impossibility. However, there are also things that do not exist now, but may be brought into existence by an efficient cause. These entities or properties have neither actual being nor absolute nonbeing. St. Thomas Aquinas adapted Aristotle's distinctions by moving potential being into the rubric of being rather than nonbeing (O'Brien 2016; Corduan 2016). If Western (European-originated) philosophy is, indeed, a footnote to Plato, we must give Parmenides credit for providing a significant impetus for these notes.[1]

2. Moving South-East

The intent of this article is to survey how Indic philosophies have responded to similar questions within their schools. It seems wisest to reject the idea that Parmenides directly influenced South-Asian thinkers—or vice versa—and it behooves us to listen to Johannes Bronkhorst's caveat, "The most serious mistake a modern reader can make is to assume that Indian philosophers were just like modern philosophers, the main difference being that they lived many centuries ago, in India, and expressed themselves in different languages, mainly Sanskrit" (Bronkhorst 2022).

Still, one cannot deny a certain resemblance between ancient Greek and Indian philosophers within their respective geographical settings; however, until evidence replaces speculation, it is best to assume that any resemblances that we may find are due to the fact that human beings are likely to reflect on similar issues and come to similar answers. Let us also keep in mind that various locations (East Asia, Europe, South Asia, the Americas, etc.) host numerous philosophical approaches. Given different background cultures and religious settings, concepts and their verbal expressions may carry family resemblances, but the actual conclusions clash with each other.

There are six Hindu schools of philosophy that are considered *astika*, which literally means "it exists," but is a word in search of a meaning in its application. They are sometimes called "orthodox" because they acknowledge the Vedas as divine and authoritative, though a more specific meaning may be "affirming," as suggested by Nicholson (2010, pp. 154–55). However, that expression remains ambiguous since we don't have a consensus on what is being affirmed. Furthermore, certain early lists of the six schools do not differentiate between those that are now labeled *astika* or *nāstika* ("non-affirming"), including Buddhism and Jainism. Even the atheistic materialist school Cārvāka/Lokāyata shows up in a poem by the Tamil writer Cāttanār. Nicholson (2010, p. 149) hypothesizes that somewhere along the line the number of schools as six had become normative, but that different writers disagreed on exactly which ones should be considered among their ranks.

The relationships between the different schools have been, in today's jargon, "complex." On the one hand, we must reckon with any person's desire to consider one's own school as the one that most accurately represents "the truth of their belief system." Some Indic schools of philosophy at times go a little further and award a "consolation prize" to other schools by claiming that their partial truth is sufficient for those believers who are not yet ready for the ultimate truth. According to that mindset, they all bear the same message, but merely differ in the concepts they use to convey it. Such a claim has become

almost routine for the monistic Advaita Vedānta school of Ādi Śaṅkara (ca. 800?) and has been broadly accepted by Western and Western-educated thinkers who found that they could accommodate their need for tidy philosophical abstractions or theosophical tendencies best by focusing on Vedānta rather than some of the alternatives. For example, the well-known scholar and stateman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan held up Advaita as not only the true culmination of all schools of Hinduism, but of all religions, thereby turning an apparent inclusivism into a universal exclusivism (Radhakrishnan 1975).

In a similar vein, the contemporary pandit Rajmani Tingunait states, "The various schools of Indian philosophy . . . represent the same single truth realized at different levels and from different perspectives" (Tingunait 2007, p. 13). Later, he claims that "All systems of Indian philosophy have the unique quality of cooperating with each other" (Tingunait 2007, p. 16). As his discussion moves on, he invokes an impressive image: "Advaita is the most thorough. Ādi Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta is like an elephant's footprint that covers the little footprint of all the other Indian systems" (Tingunait 2007, p. 33). The resolution for any apparent inconsistencies, Tingunait tells us, is found when we subordinate our own logic and reason to teachers whom we should follow since they have achieved a direct and immediate vision of the truth (Tingunait 2007, pp. 213–14).

On the other hand, the historical reality behind the polemic is that the division into groups of likeminded thinkers has often resulted in vicious conflict, acerbic writings, and even physical confrontations, which is not an indictment but a demonstration that the Indian sages were as committed to the truth as they saw it, just as much as the intellectuals of other cultures (Nicholson 2010; Shrimali 2017). That assessment does not imply that the adherents of Indic philosophies displayed such loyalty to their schools that they did no more than write to defend them once they were established. The eminent historian of Indian philosophy, Surendranath Dasgupta, went too far when he wrote off the later philosophers as utterly lacking in creativity and freedom of thought. Dasgupta asserted,

> All the independence of their thinking was limited and enchained by the faith of the school to which they were attached. Instead of producing a succession of free-lance thinkers having their own systems to propound and establish, India had brought forth systems from generation to generation, who explained and expounded them, and defended them against the attacks of other rival schools which they constantly attacked in order to establish the superiority of the system to which they adhered. (Dasgupta 1922, p. 63)

This statement misleads us in the opposite direction from the Vedāntic inclusivism. Engagements with different schools were frequently diatribes, but they were not always hostile. We also find new ways of thinking, an exchange of insights, and some cross fertilization, again following the usual pattern of literate philosophizing around the globe. That observation includes the fact that they debated the issue of being and nonbeing, just as their colleagues far to the west.

3. An Important Proposition

As is well-known, the Bhagavad Gītā is a small section of the Mahabharata, which tells the story of the champion archer Arjuna, his four brothers (collectively called the Pandavas), and Draupadi, the wife whom all five shared. They were in conflict with their cousins, the morally reprobate Kauravas. As we come to the final battle between them, Arjuna is leading the army of the Pāṇḍavās. The god Krishna, who took their side, served as Arjuna's chariot driver. Even as the commanders on both sides were sounding their conch shells to initiate the fight, Arjuna suddenly questioned the propriety of killing his relatives because of the bad karma that such an action would accrue (BhG 1.28–47, 2:2–8). Krishna reproved the warrior's pusillanimity (BhG 2.15–53 *et passim*) and used the occasion to lecture him concerning the cosmos, karma, and his own supremacy. Within Krishna's rebuke of Arjuna, we find the line:

> *Nāsato vidyate bhāvo, nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ.* (BhG 2.16; Sargeant 1994)

which we can translate as "The unreal does not exist; what does not exist is not real." What Krishna is telling Arjuna is that he should not worry about killing people in his capacity as warrior. A person's soul, which is indestructible, cannot be extinguished, while the body is bound to die eventually anyway. Krishna gives credit for this assertion to the philosophers of his day who have seen through both reality/unreality and existence/non-existence.

On first hearing, one might wonder why this affirmation concerning the difference between being and nonbeing is an interesting observation at all. After all, everyone knows that whatever does not exist is not real, and that whatever is not real does not exist, right? Mrs. Bunbury (in Oscar Wilde's play "The importance of being Earnest") is not real, and so she does not exist; Mrs. Bunbury does not exist, and so she is not real. Why does it take professional philosophers to study this issue in order to clarify such an obvious fact?

However, then we remember Parmenides and recognize that Krishna is making a similar assertion as Parmenides', admonishing us not to confuse being and nonbeing, a category mistake one finds frequently in ordinary language. We can ask ourselves, "Wouldn't it be appropriate to say that, if there is no Mrs. Bunbury, then her non-existence is real?" Or, if she is not real, isn't it puzzling that Algernon is claiming to visit someone who doesn't exist, so that his reference to Mrs. Bunbury does not refer to anyone or anything? Can one speak about visiting a non-existent person? Even if Mrs. Bunbury were real and would exist, we still know that there must have been a time when there was no Mrs. Bunbury; so, how can something that was unreal turn into something real?

4. Some Upanishads

The problem of the reality of being and the status of nonbeing became a widely discussed issue as Hindu religion and philosophy took a large step forward when some of the Upanishads began to be written around the sixth century B.C.; this is about the time when Buddhism and Jainism emerged. The Upanishads are considered to be the last of the śruti, viz. the revealed truths "heard" by the *ṛṣis* and are often called the *Vedānta*, which can mean either "the supplement" or "the appendix" to the Vedas. They are each embedded in the corpus of one of the four Vedas and, even though it is customary to focus on their innovative philosophical contributions, a large part of their content is given over to clarifying the rules for priests and sacrifices as brought up in the Vedas and already amplified in some Brahmānas and Sūtras.

As we have already mentioned, when it comes to the Upanishad's philosophical contributions, a widespread understanding is that they teach only Advaita Vedānta, the philosophy that would eventually be popularized by *Adi Śaṅkara*, according to whom the highest form of Brahman is impersonal. The way of finding release (*moksha*) from the seemingly never-ending cycle of reincarnations is by overcoming one's ignorance (*avidya*) of the eternal identity of one's deepest Self (*Atman*) with Brahman.

In fact, not all the Upanishads teach this idea, and some that do so provide variations in their descriptions thereof. The idea that interests us here is the blank assertion of the Advaita school that that there is no being other than Brahman, and that the phenomenal world is *maya*, which in this context is an illusion and, consequently, not real. There are other interpretations of the Upanishads, including the *Bhedābhedavādins* (Nicholson 2010, pp. 30–38), who still considered *maya* an obstacle, but thought of its origin as a real transformation and not merely an emanation of Brahman. The idea that the universe is purely a direct emanation from Brahman is taught in the Mundaka Upanishad, (MunU 1.1.8, Sastri 1905). It states:

> *tapasā cīyate brahma tato'nnamabhijāyate annātprāṇo manaḥ satyam lokāḥ karmasu cāmṛtam [ca-amaṛtam].]*

I need to supply my own translation here: "By means of great ascetic effort Brahma[2] expands, and then matter is born by him; From matter arises breath, truth [*what is real, what exists*], the worlds, and—by means of works—immortality."

The placement of the particle *ca* ("and," cf. Latin–*que*) seems to show that the various items listed all have one origin, namely matter sent forth from its being; there does not

appear to be a chain of causality here. Everything arises out of matter, which is Brahman's self-extension.

The previous verse (MunU 1,1:7) had likened the process to plants rising up out of the ground, a spider spinning its thread, and hair growing on a person. We are looking at a complete identity of God and the universe right from the beginning, and there is no question that everything that exists is an emanation of Brahman.

On the other hand, the sixth part of the Chandogya Upanishad (ChU, Lokeswarananda 2017) which is so frequently cited for its repetition of the mantra *tat tvam asi*, does not start with a pure identity of God and the world. The sage Uddālaka Āruṇi teaches his son Svetaketu that first there was only the "One" (*Sat* or *Tat*). *Sadeva somyedamagra āsīdekamevādvitīyam*. "Son, before this world was manifest there was only existence, one without a second." (ChU 6.2.1). Uddālaka impresses on him that the idea of Sat arising from Asat (the real from the unreal) is absurd (ChU 6.2.2).

Still, he continues, Sat decided to bring multiplicity into the world by producing fire. *Tadaikṣata bahu syāṃ prajāyeyeti tatteja*, "May I become many; it sent forth fire" (ChU 6.2.3 Müller, SBE 01 6,2.3) Fire then created water, which, in turn, created earth. Presumably a bare moment later, perhaps best seen as a logical step than a temporal sequence, Brahman decided to enter fire, water, and earth, which he calls "gods," thereby perhaps setting the precedent for the Purva Mimamsa school, for which the Vedic deities are abstractions or mental images, *Devataikṣata hantāhamimāstisro devatā anena jīvenātmanānupraviśya nāmarūpe vyākaravāṇīti* (ChU 6.3.2).

Now the question is whether Sat simply turned a part of itself into fire, or whether it created fire ex nihilo. From this verse alone, it may appear that fire is an emanation of Brahman, just as it was in the Mundaka Upanishad, but there are also good reasons to believe that this may not be what the author had in mind.

First, thinking in general terms, let us remind ourselves that, metaphysically, creation *ex nihilo* is never absolute, just as Uddālaka had declared. All being is derived from God's Being and not from nothing, and thus the resolution, "May I be many," does not necessarily imply pure emanationism. If I may return to Western philosophy for a bridge across continents, presumably no one would question that St. Thomas Aquinas taught creation *ex nihilo*, but he also maintained that creatures exist and are good insofar as they participate in God's Being (which is convertible with his Goodness).

> Hence from the first being, essentially such, and good, everything can be called good and a being, inasmuch as it participates in it by way of a certain assimilation which is far removed and defective. (ST l. 6. 4)

For Aquinas, God's Being and our being are analogous rather than identical, but there could be no analogy of being if God were not Being preeminently, and if creatures did not derive their being from his creative act. As such, we would be over-interpreting if we considered every statement that refers to God as the source of being as emanationist.

There are two reasons to believe that, in this Upanishad, "creation" is a more accurate word than "emanation."

1. The Sat engages in self-talk; it is a conscious being, and it recognizes the fire as distinct from itself. Fire, in turn, gives rise to water, and then water produces earth (which becomes synonymous with food in this context). Thus, there is independent causal agency in the elements themselves apart from the direct agency of the Sat, in contrast to the Mundaka Upanishad, where everything arises simultaneously.

2. However, the argument is even stronger. For all practical purposes, the question is resolved in the next part (ChU 6.3.2) when Sat decides to enter his creation by means of the *Atman*. This notion would not make much sense if the creation were already identical with *Brahmn/Atman*

My point is that in distinction to other Vedāntic conceptions, the identity of Brahman and Atman in this particular case may not be something that is true in the first instance of creation but is the result of a logically discrete second action by the Creator. Here Atman

and Brahman are identical, but only because Brahman made it so. A similar sequence is described in the Taittirīyaka Upanishad (TaitU 2.6; Sivananda 2023).

Furthermore, some Upanishads tend in the direction of a personal theism, which is to say that the greatest being is the Person, *Puruṣa*, a word that frequently indicates the highest level of a human soul. The Katha Upanishad states (KathU 1.3.11), *Puruṣānna paraṁ kiṁcitsā kāṣṭhā sā parā gatiḥ*; "Nothing is higher than Puruṣa, the destination of our journey." Furthermove, the Svetasvatara Upanisad (Svetasvatara 2011) is frequently considered to be theistic. It begins by looking a lot as though it were a variety of Advaita monism, with each person participating in God. However, as we move along reading it, it turns out that God in this context is the personal *Īśvara* whose identity appears to be as one of Śiva's manifestations.

There is no need to make too much of these differences. Each of the Upanishads is a separate work and should not be required to be consistent. In fact, as suggested earlier, the thinkers that have declared them to be consistent by *fiat* do not have much ground for their assertion as long as one sticks to what the scriptures actually say. Still, the teachings of the Upanishads are far from identical, and, consequently, it is not surprising that a number of philosophical schools should arise, each one claiming that it is based on the Upanishads. They are also called "Vedic" in the sense of being a part of the other śruti.

One can mention, as alternatives, the dualistic interpretations of Madhva or the personalist-monist teachings of Ramanuja. To be forewarned is to be forearmed, and one should be careful not to assume unity of thought where there probably is none. Nonetheless, after all is said and written, there is no question that, in terms of popularity, the Upanishads' most prominent contribution to Hinduism has been the notion of the Atman-Brahman identity.

5. The Brahma/Vedānta Sūtra

As we continue to look at the various understandings of being, nothingness, and causality as they became fixed in the various schools of philosophy, it is natural that we turn to the *Brahma Sūtra*, also known as the *Vedānta Sūtra*, composed by (Vyasa Bādarāyana 1996), one of the six founding sūtras of the major schools. From here on out I shall follow the pragmatic consensus and reserve the term "Vedāntic" only for the monistic school, although doing so is without question an over-generalized approach.

The Brahma Sūtra addresses our issue directly and, at first glance, with little subtlety. Only being exists. There is no nonbeing. How can we account for the fact that there seems to be nonbeing? We have to realize that nonbeing actually is being; it is just unmanifested being. A cause and its effect are actually identical.

The Sūtra begins with the assertion *janmādyasya yataḥ*: "Brahman is the origin of all that exists" (BS 1.1.2. Sivananda 1949). It declares that there can be no knowledge of unreality or nonbeing because there is no epistemology that could identify either. *Nāsato'dṛṣṭatvāt:* "Unreality is not seen" (BS 2.2.26), followed by *nābhāva upalabdheḥ*: "Nonbeing is not experienced" (2.2.28).

In order to gain greater clarity, let us follow the course suggested by the Vedāntists and call on a guru who can explain this matter further. Swami Sivananda (1887–1963) inserted a long commentary in his edition of the Sūtra. He stated,

> It is absurd to say that non-existence (*asat*) existed. Therefore, *Sat* is manifest, i.e., having shape and form, whereas *Asat* means fine, subtle, and unmanifested. *Asat* refers to another attribute of the effect, namely its non-manifestation.

So, nonbeing actually does have being for Sivananda, but only by invoking a novel understanding of being hidden in the fullness of Being, viz. Brahman.

> The words *Sat* or *Asat* refer to two attributes of one and the same object, namely to its gross and or manifested condition and subtle or unmanifested condition. That is all. An absolutely nonexistent thing like the horns of a hare can never come into existence. The cause cannot produce an altogether new thing which was not existent in it already. (2.1.7–8)

If there is a cause, insofar as it is real, Brahman has "created" it out of its own Being. The question comes up whether the effect exists already as well, and, if so, in what sense. The answer is that the effect, just as the cause, already has eternal existence in Brahman; it has just not yet manifested itself. The effect exists in the cause in an unmanifested state.

In such a case, the words "cause" and "effect" have been given a new meaning. Brahman is not really causing anything; he is merely emanating parts of himself into maya. To be sure, Bādarāyana and Sivananda come out as though they have conquered the Parmenidean paradox, but only by giving "nonbeing" a new meaning as "crypto-being-in-hiding."

6. Sāṃkhya: A Dualistic, Pluralistic, Agnostic Alternative

The Sāṃkhya Sūtra (SmkS) differs from other Sūtras insofar as it may not be the best text to represent the fundamental teaching of its school. The Sūtra's author is supposed to have been a sage called Kapila, who wrote it back in hoary antiquity, allegedly as early as the time of the Vedas (SmkS 1996; Ballantyne 1885, trans). However, it is more likely that it was written quite a bit later, possibly as late as the 14th century A.D. There may very well have been a single school that we now recognize as two different ones; Yoga and Sāṃkhya may have been its spin-off. Yoga recognizes a god *Īśvara* (Patañjali 1998) while the Sāṃkhya Sūtra argues against his existence; otherwise, both share a very similar metaphysical underpinning. From a scholarly point of view, it may be the case that a better representation of Sāṃkhya in general may be the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, a poem written by *Īśvarakṛṣṇa*, quite likely at some time during the fourth or fifth centuries A.D., in which case it may have predated the Sūtra by almost a millennium. Nevertheless, this article is not intended to be an exercise in textual criticism, and so we will stick to the Sūtra. After all, rightly or wrongly, it did become the standard bearer for Sāṃkhya (Adamson and Ganeri 2020, pp. 148–54; Dasgupta 1922, pp. 208–73).

To put it simply, whereas Advaita Vedānta claims that there is only one reality (Brahman), which is considered divine, and that all of us, by virtue of Atman, are that single reality, the Sāṃkhya school contends that there are two basic eternal realities, namely the physical world (*prakṛti*) and the souls (*puruṣa*), of which there are as many as there are living beings (*jīvās*). Prakṛti is characterized first and foremost by three constituents, called guṇas. They are *sattva* ("purity and lightness"), *rajas* ("activity and energy"), and *tamas* ("sluggishness and darkness"). They should be in equilibrium but are often out of balance (SmkS 1.60). They are made up of twenty-four elements. In addition to those, puruṣa stands alone. It does not emanate from prakṛti, nor does prakṛti originate from puruṣa. Both are eternal and uncreated.

Given the way that Kapila set up his dualistic metaphysic, there is no place for *Īśvara* since there is nothing for him to create or to interact with. Presumably he could be considered a preeminent puruṣa, but those are the souls of human beings. That leaves him with two options, both of which relegate the hypothetical Īśvara to an insignificant position. On the one hand we could say that if Īśvara shares the attributes of puruṣa, all puruṣas are gods. That is a view that is certainly not outrageous in an Indic context, but it means that Īśvara has no preeminence over the other puruṣas. However, if he is not different from other puruṣas, why single him out as anything special? (SmkS 5).

Nicholson (2010, pp. 84–108) elaborates on the theory that Kapila might not have meant what he said as a dictum. The 16th-century scholar Vijnāñabikṣu mentions two possibilities. One is that maybe Kapila wanted to mislead evil people who were not fit for finding moksha. They would feel confirmed in their atheism and not change their lives. Wise and deserving people, viz., those who are in search of truth, would recognize that this particular section of the Sūtra could not have been based on true revelation. Another possibility is that Kapila promoted atheism in this section out of pastoral concern. People needed to recognize that their redemption had to come from their own self-realization, while reliance on one or more gods would hold them back rather than contribute to their progress. So, Kapila was using an apparent falsehood in order to lead people to the truth, reminiscent of the Buddhist concept of *upaya* ("skillful means"). Regardless of the intent of

the possibly mythical Kapila, he and perhaps a minority of later followers make it rather clear that we should not put our trust in a Creator. If there were one, his presence would be irrelevant, and if there is none, nothing has changed.

All the various attributes of prakṛti taken together constitute *pradhāna*, or "Nature." Please note that pradhāna is not an actual entity. We need to think of it as a generalization or a concept that collectively describes the properties of prakṛti, but that does not exist as a single being. This is a tricky point to understand because Kapila's statement on that issue resembles the idea that usually emerges with various versions of the cosmological argument, viz. the rejection of an infinite regress of caused causes, which then leads us to posit a first cause. However, Sāṃkhya does not lead us to an uncaused being. *Pāramparye ʻpyekatra parinishtheti sāmgya-mātram*: "Even if there might be a succession, it has to stop at some *one* point; and so it is only a name."

What Kapila is saying here is that there is no point in looking for a cause of *pradhāna*. If you were to identify a *cause-of-pradhāna*, then you would need to find a cause for the *cause-of-pradhāna*. But then the *cause-of-the-cause-of-pradhāna* would itself need a cause, and so we would move on into an infinite regress, which is not at all helpful. Thus, prakṛti simply exists and evolves. It has no cause, needs no cause, and generates the plurality of objects in the world in a metaphorical sense only insofar as they are its components. It certainly does not bring any immaterial reality into existence. This aphorism explains the previous one (SmkS 1.67) in which Kapila gives us the memorable dictum *mūle mūlābhāvādamūla mūlam*. "Since the root has no root, the root [of all] is rootless." Furthermore, the same analysis applies to the reality of *puruṣa*. It just is.

We now need to take a closer look at the problem that Sāṃkhya seeks to solve, namely that each *puruṣa* is entrapped in *prakṛti*, thus engendering suffering. Consequently, *puruṣa* needs to find a way of disentangling itself from *prakṛti*. How did this frustrating situation come about? Kapila begins with the remark that any quick, external, physical remedy for suffering totally misses the point because the cause of suffering lies deeper than present physical circumstances. For one thing, we have no clear knowledge of what to do on the physical side; for another, it is clear from Scripture that such palliatives are insufficient.

We can draw certain implications from the observation that Kapila was invoking the authority of the *śruti*. Recognizing the Vedas as authoritative does not imply accepting the gods mentioned in the *śruti* as real. The Vedas are thought to have been breathed out by Brahmā, the creator, and yet, even though Kapila specifically denied the creator's existence, he appealed to Vedic writings as authoritative. Thus, it is not unfair to say that, in many intellectual parts of Hinduism, the emphasis is far more on a person's liberation (*moksha*) than on the worship of any gods.

Now, to return to Kapila's argument. After having explained that the root of the soul's suffering runs too deep to be alleviated by simple ad hoc measures, he moves in the other direction and emphasizes that neither is it so deep that it is an essential attribute of the soul. He acknowledges the fact that substances may have essential qualities (for example, a white cloth would not be a white cloth if it were not both a piece of cloth and white), but the suffering of *puruṣa* cannot be essential to it because, if so, its liberation would be impossible and the obligation to liberate it would be meaningless. Furthermore, since it is not impossible to escape time or physical location, neither temporality nor spatial limitation can be the cause of the situation. In fact, since temporality and locality are attributes of *prakṛti* and not of *puruṣa*, appealing to either time or space as the cause—and thereby, perhaps a potential solution of the situation—is not only unhelpful, but is downright absurd to him.

So, is the suffering of the *puruṣa* caused by *pradhāna* (nature)? No, of course not, because, as we stated above, *pradhāna* is nothing more than the accumulation of the various factors named above, and for another, in order for *pradhāna* to cause *puruṣa* to suffer, the two would have to be directly connected to each other, and they are not. Thus, I am clarifying now that, when I stated earlier that *purushās* were "entrapped" in *prakṛti*, this entanglement is not a matter of two exercising causal agency on each other. A frequently used simile is

that they are attached to each other as a magnet to a piece of iron, viz., without penetrating or changing each other.

The Vedāntic answer to the problem of the soul is well known: the individual person lives in ignorance (*avidya*) of his identity with Brahman, and once that ignorance is removed, liberation will result. However, Kapila is not satisfied with that solution. He attempts to impale the Vedāntist on the horns of a trilemma. He asks, is this *avidya* real or unreal? If it is real, then Vedāntic monism has contradicted itself; there would be two fundamental realities: Brahman and avidya. If it is unreal, we have the peculiar situation that something unreal, namely avidya, causes something very real, namely suffering, which is clearly impossible. Finally, to say that it is both real and unreal is to utter gibberish. Kapila emphasizes this point (SkmS 1:20). *Nāvidyāto 'pyavastunā bhandāyogat.* "Not from ignorance because what is not reality cannot bind anything." After a few more refinements, Kapila gets to the bottom of the problem. We have learned so far that the bondage of the soul to *prakṛti* is not caused (a) internally by the nature of the soul, (b) externally by *prakṛti* or any of its attributes, or (c) by ignorance.

One might just get to the point of wondering whether it is caused by anything, and—wouldn't you know it?—that is actually what Sāṃkhya wants us to recognize. Causality in and of itself presents a problem. It is not something that is discerned empirically. It cannot be inferred from a temporal sequence because if the cause precedes the effect, then you have the cause first in time and the effect second in time and, therefore, no opportunity in time for the cause to bring about the effect. However, if the cause and its effect are simultaneous, then there is no reason to infer that one item is the cause and the other the effect.

Having ruled out various causes, Kapila claims that the reason for the soul's suffering lies in its lack of discrimination between itself and nature. This lack of discrimination is not ignorance, but a failure to act on something that the soul already knows by its intellect. When people live as though the physical properties of nature apply to their souls, they have enslaved themselves to *prakṛti*.

Let us review where these opening statements of the Sāṃkhya Sūtra leave us in regard to our leitmotif: *The unreal does not exist; what does not exist is not real.* There are two fundamental realities: *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. They both exist. To consign one or the other to unreality does not work because then unreality would exist. To claim that the sufferings of *puruṣa* are due to ignorance would be to commit exactly that mistake because, in that case, unreality (the absence of true knowledge) would cause suffering, and unreality cannot cause anything. The two realities are given; they are not caused because nothing cannot cause anything. The only answer is to learn to understand the natures of the two realities and live as one who discriminates between them.

7. Buddhism

Of the many schools of Buddhist philosophy, there are five that we cannot pass over in our survey: Sthaviravāda, Sarvāstivāda, Sautantrika, Yogācāra, and Mādhyamaka.

Sthaviravāda, the Precursor of Theravāda. ("The Tradition of the Elders")

Theravāda Buddhism, as it flourishes now in countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, very likely represents the oldest school of philosophical Buddhism under the name of *Sthaviravāda*. Its scriptures are often called the "Pali Canon," based on the idea that Pali may have been the language in which the Buddha taught. Even though the Buddha refused to answer metaphysical questions, his followers could not resist engaging in speculations that undergirded what he taught. One thing was obvious: he denied a notion of a "Self" comparable to the atman of Advaita Vedānta, which was identical with Brahman. Insofar as we use the word "self," it is only a bundle of successive perceptions (*dharmas*) with no actual perceiver other than the *anatman* ("non-self"), who—as the name implies—does not exist. A non-self cannot be; if it did, it could be any object in the universe because none of them are "selves." They lack *svabhava*, "self-being."

Given this premise, the question of the nature of the world that apparently yields such perceptions becomes paramount. The second "noble truth" tells us that our suffering is caused by desire (clinging, passion, clutching), and thus it becomes important to understand what we are grasping for to our detriment. What is it that we call "being," and where does it stem from?

There are two *suttas* that specifically address the issue of the root of being. One of them is short, appropriately designated as the *Mula Sutta*, the "Sutta of the Root." (AN 10.58). Here the Buddha catechizes his disciples on what to say if anyone asks them, "In what are all phenomena rooted?" After expanding on progressively more specific ways of asking that question, he begins with the answer, "All phenomena are rooted in desire." From there he responds to the previous versions of the questions, which ultimately lead to the statement that Nirvana (*nibbana*) is their final end, though he does not say that nibbana is the cause of the phenomena.

The *Mūlapariyāya Sutta*, the "Root Sequence Sutta" (Mulapariyaya Sutta and Commentaries. Dhamma Wheel. Buddhist Discussion Forum 2019)[3] (Tanissaro Bikkhu n.d.) carries an interesting back story and gives the discussion an unexpected twist. The ancient commentaries apparently agree that the audience for this sermon consisted of Brahmins who were in the process of converting to the Buddha's teachings. The most likely scenario seems to be that these seekers for the truth had come from an early Vedāntic background and were not yet ready for the Buddha's new insights. They had been taught before that all that truly exists comes from the highest source of being, Brahman. As such, now they may have been reasoning that the highest good in Buddhism is Nirvana. Consequently, Nirvana must be the root of being, and the result of this insight should bring joy and delight.

The Buddha began this sermon by stating that he would explain the sequence for the roots of all experienced reality. "Monks, I will teach you the sequence of the root of all phenomena. Listen and pay close attention. I will speak." If the people in his audience expected a metaphysical discourse, they must have been disappointed.

The Buddha started out his lecture by describing the difference between people on four different stages of growth in Buddhism.[4] There is a layperson, an aspiring disciple, a person who has grasped the meaning of Buddhist teaching (an *arhant*), and the *Tathagata*, another one of the Buddha's titles. The most significant difference between them is brought out each time in the last part of each description, which refers to their relationship with Nirvana; Thānissaro Bikkhu refers to this as "unbinding."

Laypersons are anticipating the joy of Nirvana, based on their under-developed perceptions. Among the layperson's deficiencies are that he "delights in unbinding." The Buddha instructs the aspiring disciple, "let him not delight in unbiding." The arhant who has attained realization "does not delight in unbinding." Nor, for that matter, does the Tathagata, but he adds a very important insight concerning himself.

> He has known that delight is the root of suffering and stress, that from coming-into-being there is birth, and that for what has come into being there is aging and death. Therefore, with the total ending, fading away, cessation, letting go, relinquishment of craving, the Tathāgata has totally awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening, I tell you.

How can "delight" be the root of suffering? The reason lies in the obverse of what Śakyamuni taught in the fourth noble truth. To be sure, we suffer when our cravings are not fulfilled. However, we make things worse for ourselves when our cravings are fulfilled. We experience periods of "delight"; we rejoice and expect this particular situation to be "normal." Then, sooner or later, our object of delight is no longer accessible, and we will become twice as miserable as before.

Before continuing with different schools of Buddhism, we need to remind ourselves that we have not deserted the philosophical Parmenidean question and its implied ontology and run after psychology. What we have just described is the way in which the Buddha saw the being of the world. It is grounded in our attachment to what we think and perceive, and thus our subjective attachments are the basis for an ontology. Rather than an independently

existing world to which we attach ourselves, we crave a world that will fill us with delight and become attached to its temporary rewards. The world to which we have tied ourselves is a conglomerate of beings that are mutually dependent on each other, held in place by our desires, and recognized by us as fleeting dharmas ("perceptions"). There is no single uncaused cause, only a multitude of caused causes, *paticca samuppāda*, "dependent origination," sometimes called "Indra's Web," and it is fragile and brittle. A dharma pops in and out of existence in infinitesimal units of time, just long enough that it is logically possible to say that it existed, and woe to the one who thinks he can find peace in them.

> *Sarvāstivāda ("Those who say that everything exists").* (Dasgupta 1922, pp. 112–13; Bastow 1995)

A philosophical rival to the Sthaviravādin school was the school called Sarvāstivāda, which held to the eternal existence of everything (thereby implying simultaneity.) Nothing causes anything to be; everything is there already, it is just a matter of when, where, and how different items present themselves as dharmas for us to perceive. We need to make one further adjustment on this matter since we do live in an ordered, sometimes even highly predictable world. The so-called external world does not do the ordering. Any ordering is done by our minds. Thus, we recognize something as a cause and something else as its effect because our mental equipment is geared to this logical succession. Thus, the statement above needs a qualifier: "All things exist eternally, but are known only momentarily as our minds perceive them." Consequently, since these entities only present themselves in the blink of a perception, it is just as dangerous to hang on to one of them as in the Sthaviravādi model. This observation leads us back to the intent of this article.

Sautrāntrika

Some adherents of the Sarvāstivāda philosophy raised doubts about the understanding of time. The Buddha had never given an answer to the question of whether the world is eternal or temporal, finite or infinite (Rhys Davids 1899, pp. 244–64) Consequently, this group argued that they should base their beliefs only on the Sūtras, not on their exposition (*abidharma*). Their name, Sautrāntrika, relates to their exclusive adherence to the Sūtras. People can only live and perceive things directly in the present. Crucially, they continued the Sarvāstivādin idea that it is the human mind (*citta*) that calls up the perceptions of the moment. Thus, we are looking here at the making of an idealism in the Western sense; whatever is thought to exist has its reality purely from within ourselves, albeit as a succession of momentary cameo appearances.

Yogācāra

As Buddhism moved towards its Mahāyāna form, the idea took hold that the world of dependent origination (*paticca samuppāda)* had no content. It looks as though it is something real, but a closer examination shows that it is empty. The word for this universal Emptiness is *Śūnyatā*, which shares a root with the Sanskrit term for "zero," *śūnya* (Adamson and Ganeri 2020, p. 240).

This begs the question: why does our phenomenal world look real to us? Around the third or fourth century A.D, two brothers, named Vasubandhu and Asaṅga, pulled together a systematic explanation. One cannot deny that there is consciousness. Deluded or not, I experience consciousness of the world around me. However, consciousness cannot arise spontaneously by itself; there must be a consciousness connecting up with the present consciousness. However, that is as far as we may go with our analysis. We may not reify this consciousness. It is not a thing; it is at best a mental event. We can remember our past because a consciousness has left its after-image in our memory banks. Such remainders "perfume" our minds and cause them to become seeds, paving the way for new experiences of consciousness. However, does anything exist? Only if one wants to give consciousness, per se, ontological status, which was not the intent.

The *Yogācāra* school of Buddhism does not take the Augustinian (and, later on, Cartesian) step from recognizing mental events to an argument that if there is thought, there

must be a thinking being. We are confronted with the undeniable event of consciousness; thus, there must be consciousness. Insofar as we might insist that consciousness exists, it is an imaginary piece of very flimsy celluloid film, playing in the cinema of our minds. At one time, Yogācāra had a strong presence among the religious schools of Buddhism. For example, in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the deceased person, who is confronted with sequences of lights of different colors, can still find liberation if he recognizes that these perceptions are merely products of his mind. However, Madyamaka has taken over in many places where Yogācāra once held sway.

Madyamaka

The name of this school, *Madyamaka*, means the "middle way," an appellation presumably intended to pass judgment on metaphysical propositions. Its main innovator and proponent was Nāgārjuna, who lived sometime in the first two centuries A.D. As mentioned above, the Buddha refused to answer questions concerning such things as the infinity of the world. Nāgārjuna took things one step further by showing that there were no acceptable answers.

Nāgārjuna's thinking buys into the "two-truths theory." There is conventional truth, and there is ultimate truth. We do well to recognize that he takes us beyond the language describing either level and that he is concerned with reality and being. He is not merely aiming at the difference between conventional and ultimate language as referring to what is ultimately one thing, but the language he uses discloses two realms of reality (Thakchoe 2022).

> The teaching of the Buddha's dharma is based entirely on two truths, the truth of worldly common practice and paramount truth. All who do not understand the distinction between the two truths, they do not understand the profound reality in the Buddha's message. (Garfield 1995, trans., *MulaMādhyamakakārikā* 24:8–9)

Nāgārjuna placed the teachings of Buddhism itself on the level of conventional truth. The very teachings of Buddhism are no more than the proverbial boat one uses to cross a river but leaves it on the shore because it is only an encumbrance in any further overland travel. Neither *paticca samuppāda*, the theory of dependent origination, nor *Śūnyatā*, the concept of Emptiness, have a meaning, let alone a referent. He states in the Mulamādhyamakakārikā 24:18,

> *yaḥ pratītyasumutpādaḥ śunyatām tām pracakṣmahe*
>
> *sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā*
>
> Whatever is conditioned co-arising ["dependent origination"], that is emptiness, we claim; this notion [emptiness], once acquired, is truly the middle path. (Berger n.d., trans.)

Why should it be the case that the universe of dependent origination is emptiness? Nagarjuna recognizes the "boot strapping" that creates "Indra's Web." "A" causes "B," "B" causes "C," "C" causes "D," "and "D" causes "A." None of these alleged beings have *svabhava*, an "essential being of their own." They cannot really exist if none of them can serve as anchor for all the other beings. We can remind ourselves that the Buddha did give a root for the being of the phenomenal world: our desire. Nāgārjuna demonstrates that once we have given up tying ourselves to this deceptive nexus, we recognize the emptiness of it all, a step that takes us much closer to Nirvana.

8. Vaiśeṣika

In stark contrast to Buddhism, the Vaiśeṣika school and its partner, the Nyāya school of logic, embrace metaphysical realism. There is a world, and it is composed of atoms, viz. particles so small that they cannot be cut any smaller (the original meaning of *a-tom*), and, thus, cannot be perceived either.

The Vaiśeṣika School is sometimes called the "scientific" school because it engages in the categorization of various entities in the universe (Tingunait 2007, pp. 105, 113–14).

They are substance, quality, action, generality, uniqueness, inherence, and non-existence. It is the last-mentioned one (*abhāva*) that we are concerned with. How can non-existence be a category? How can we even recognize it in a meaningful way? How can we talk about it without saying something silly? Kanāda, the author of the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra (Kanāda 1996; Sinha 1932) was of course careful not to talk nonsense and pointed out two categories of different types of non-existence.

1. The Absence of Something in Something Else (Tingunait 2007, p. 114)
    a. The non-existence of a future existence. When a potter has a clump of clay on his table, the pot that he intends to make does not exist yet. Once he has made it, the pot exists. We could call this "non-existence from eternity past with a time limit."
    b. Eternal non-existence after existence. The pot existed, but someone dropped it, and it is now all in pieces. This same pot can never exist again; it is consigned to non-existence for all eternity. This is "eternal non-existence with a beginning."
    c. Absolute non-existence. Something that cannot ever become real. Pride of place in this category goes to logically incoherent items such as the weight of goodness or a square circle.
2. Mutual non-existence. Caesar and Mark Antony are two different people. Caesar is not Mark Antony, and Mark Antony is not Caesar. Thus, it follows that they are separated by nonbeing. They cannot change into each other; there is no causal relationship between them. They are divided by Caesar's non-existence as Mark Antony and Mark Antony's non-existence as Caesar.

9. The Nyāya Sūtra

Let us bring in one final school of philosophy and consider its contribution to the debate. Its author, Gotama Akshapāda ("Gotama with eyes on his feet"), stemmed from a family of outstanding leaders and scholars. In addition to this Sūtra, he was probably also the author of other prominent works. He is mentioned by name in some later texts as welas in the Ramayana (Valmiki Ramayana Bala Kanda 1.48.11–33). Eventually the Nyāya school fused with Vaiśeṣika.

The Nyāya Sūtra (NS) tackles the Parmenidean problem directly. Here are some relevant aphorisms from Vidyabhusana's translation of (Gotama 1997; NS 2.2.7–12; Vidyabhusana 2003).

2.2.7. *nā bhāvapramanyam prameyāsiddeḥ*

"Some say that non-existence is not a means of right knowledge because there is no object which is known by it." The objector who is addressed here believes that all perceptions must have a referent, the object of perception. Nonbeing (*nābhāva)* cannot be perceived directly, and thus supposedly, we cannot have knowledge of it either.

2.2.8. *lakṣiteshvalakṣanalakṣitatvādalkṣitānā tatprameyasiddheḥ*

"Non-existence, we reply, serves to mark out the object unmarked by the mark which characterizes other objects." Nonbeing, per se, could obviously not be seen, but we can recognize a "mark" or "sign" (*lakṣaṇ*) that indicates its presence of nonbeing or—undoubtedly better worded—the absence of being.

2.2.9: "If you say that the non-existence (absence) of the mark is impossible where there was no mark at all, it is, we reply, not so, because the non-existence (absence) is possible in reference to a mark elsewhere."

2.2.10: "Though a mark may distinguish the object that is marked, the non-existence (absence) of the mark cannot, some say, distinguish the object which is not marked."

2.2.11: "This is not so, because the non-existence (absence) of the mark serves as a mark in relation to the presence of the mark."

2.2.12: *prāgutpatterabhāvopapatteśca* "Moreover, we perceive non-existence [as a mark] antecedent to the production of the thing."

Gotama makes the case that, yes, we can talk about nonbeing because nonbeing, even though it obviously does not exist and is unreal, leaves a "mark" or "sign" of its presence.

The following is my own example. Suppose that someone were to come to my office to talk to me and saw that I was not sitting in my usual chair; the empty chair would be the mark of my non-existence at that place at that time. What Gotama is saying is that wherever there is no being where it could be, we can recognize its non-existence because there is evidence (the "mark") that it could be there. In fact, even the absence of a mark can serve as a mark. If my chair were missing from my office, it would be clear that I'm not sitting in my chair, a further confirmation of my absence.

We need to keep in mind that Gotama is not seeking to provide us with an infallible method of detecting nonbeing but is trying to supply a mechanism that explains how it is even possible for us to recognize nonbeing and express it with meaningful propositions. It comes down to this: nonbeing is not always absolute; nonbeing makes itself manifest in those cases where we have good reason to believe that a being that could or should exist is presently absent, as frequently signaled by a sign or mark.

10. Concluding Observations

We have seen an interesting array of approaches to the issues of being and nonbeing, reality and unreality. The parallels to Western philosophy are unavoidable, both in the issues that are raised and in the various answers that are provided. Nonetheless, we have also been confronted with some very clear differences that cannot easily be overcome by transferring the discussion from one context to the other.

We have seen that there are ambiguities in the translations of words, and, consequently, of the concepts for which they stand. Of course, this is a problem whenever we translate from one language to another. However, if we translate Kant from German to English or Hume from English to German, there is a shared heritage that allows us to make certain assumptions of the meaning of words. A similar heritage lies in the background among the various schools of Indian philosophy, but it is different from the Western context. For one thing, of course, there is the issue of language, and this is not something that just happens to affect translation into English. If everyone meant the same thing by the same expression, there would not be such a variety of schools. That observation is particularly poignant when one realizes that the sūtras are written as short aphorisms, and the general consensus seems to be that one cannot really understand a sūtra apart from having a guru teach their meaning.

The above point applies *a forteriori* to any attempt to apply Western critiques to South Asian philosophy. Traditional Christian apologetics or Western dialogs with Eastern thought must do more than simply find the apparent equivalents in Western philosophy and then apply Western arguments. I do not want to say that philosophical dialogue or debate cannot be achieved successfully, but only if we take the pains of contextualizing the concepts properly.

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Notes

[1] The school of Pythagoras, with their belief in the independent reality of numbers was also one of the influences on Plato, but it is not as germane to this article.

[2] The name *Brahma* (masc. nom.) here refers to the all-encompassing Spirit, usually referred to as *Brahman* (neut. nom) The name of the Vedic creator god is spelled *Brahmā*, ending with a long *ā* (masc. nom.) (Apte 1890).

[3] The Mūlapariyāya Sutta, MN1, trans. Thānissaro Bikkhu. Dhammatalks.com. https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN1.html (accessed on 11 May 2023). Thānissaro Bikkhu, who is well-known for his translations of many parts of the gigantic *Tipitaka*, speculates in his introduction that his listeners were still stuck in a Brahmanic mindset, an assessment with which I agree. But more specifically he conjectures that they may have been members of an early "Proto-Sāṃkhya" school of thought. This is a puzzling conclusion in several ways. For one thing, he refers to Sāṃkhya as the "classification school," a label that is usually applied to the Vaiśeṣika school. Furthermore, he avers that the founder of a proto-Sāṃkhya school was *Uddālaka*, who is known as the father of Svetaketu in the Chandokhya Upanishad. There he is depicted as encouraging his son to recognize his oneness with Brahman under the watchword, *tat tvam asi.* He is directly associated with the *Sat*, the self-existing Being, but he did not refer to it as "root." In short, there does not appear to be any significant tie-in to Sāṃkhya in the sutta's narration, but good reason to think that the listeners came from an Upanishadic background.

[4] See the very helpful table on the sutta as "A Schematic Representation of the *Mulapariyaya Sutta*. https://bodhimonastery.org/courses/MN/Tables/M0110_MN-001_Mulapariyaya.pdf (accessed on 13 February 2023).

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