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CHAPTER

Cosmic Process, Philosophy, and Soteriology in the Works of Abhinavagupta 🔓

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Abstract

An early eleventh-century polymath from Kashmir, Abhinavagupta developed groundbreaking work on metaphysics, epistemology, and aesthetics. However, he is perhaps best known as a mystic, writing on tantrism and Trika Śaiva philosophy. This chapter contextualizes the cosmology, epistemology, and soteriology of Abhinavagupta in light of particular contemporary scholarship. Explaining the world as an expression of the freedom (*svātantrya*) of the absolute, Śiva, who actualizes the manifold, Abhinava proposed a model of nondualism that recognizes the reality of the world, confirming it as an articulation of the absolute. Through both independent and commentarial works, he developed philosophy from tantric visualization and ritual practices, yogic and mystical experiences, and aesthetic experience, synthesizing these within the framework of Trika philosophy. This expresses the transcendence of the absolute from its creation, while remaining embodied and immanent. Materiality in this light is not expunged of the luminosity of consciousness or the exuberance of bliss. For Abhinava, embodiment and materiality were not the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of the absolute.

Keywords: Abhinavagupta, Trika, svātantrya, aham, ābhāsa, abhivyakti, pratyabhijñā
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The scope of this chapter is very wide and difficult to explain in limited space. What we can do is to extract the essential aspects in order to address Abhinavaguptian philosophy. As the title suggests, in addressing the three domains of cosmology, epistemology, and soteriology, all that I can do is offer snippets from the works of Abhinavagupta, mostly by engaging contemporary scholarship, so that interested readers may dive deeply into the references. Even then, I would also like to stress the new ways of reading Abhinavagupta from an interdisciplinary approach, without reducing his life and work to one or another department of our contemporary scholarship. As one of the foremost philosophers of freedom (*svātantrya*), he himself

exploited this freedom in breaching disciplinary boundaries when it came to addressing aesthetics, epistemology, mysticism, and soteriology.

Before we enter the subject, let me briefly introduce the person. Born in Kashmir, Abhinavagupta (950–1016 CE) was a great tantric yogin and mystic, as well as a great philosopher and aesthete. His major contributions lie in nondual Śaiva philosophy, especially his commentarial works on Utpala's *Īśvarapratyabhijñā-Vṛtti* and *Vivṛtti*, and independent works such as *Tantrāloka* (TA), *Paramārthasāra*, and *Tantrasāra.* These would also include his semi-independent texts that are rooted in some original Āgama texts but in fact are beyond mere expositions, such as *Parātrīśikā-Vivaraṇa* (PTV) *or Mālinīvijayavārttika.* While the rest of his works are either commentarial or original, his work Paramārthasāra is a reworking on Ādiśeṣa's text under the same title. Even though Abhinava's contribution is central to the development of Trika philosophy and Tantric mysticism, he is better known in Sanskrit literary works for his writings on aesthetics: *Dhvanyāloka-locana* and the commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata.[1] Even though not all of his works have survived to this day, we can glean his prolific, multifaçade personality, based on his works, which expand across the disciplines of aesthetics, epistemology, metaphysics, poetry, theology, and dramatology. His originality does not come from creation *ex nihilo*, as he weaves his original ideas within the rubric of the words of his teachers and the texts that he closely read. Unlike other towering figures in the history of Hindu philosophy who worked across disciplines, Abhinava wrote from the margins of the tantric Kaula system, and his works underscore interdisciplinary thinking, with his writing style blending logical rigor with poetic expression. In this essay, I am not able to address Abhinavaguptian aesthetics—the discipline for which he is primarily known in Sanskrit literature.[2] Even then, the objective of the following paragraphs is first to introduce the central nuances of Abhinava's thought that breach the boundaries of tantric mysticism and rigorous logical thought and second to bring to life some of the lesser known domains of rituals and visualizations.

Abhinavaguptian Cosmology

Two texts central in addressing Abhinavaguptian cosmology are TA and PTV. Selected nuances of his cosmology involve the ideas that (1) the world is a playful expression of consciousness that is identified with Śiva or the self; (2) materiality is as much real as the absolute form of Śiva, as this is merely His extension; (3) the body is the mirror image of the cosmos; (4) speech and its reference are not diametrically opposed but rather are interwoven with the world, therefore containing the world in its seminal form; (5) phonemes are not merely symbols for words to describe the world but are themselves fields of energy and expression of the absolute; and (6) body and mind, matter and consciousness, world and God, and all other dichotomies emerge due to ignorance or the cosmic veil imposed by Śiva or the self to maintain differentiation. What binds these apparently disparate thoughts together is his insight into freedom (*svātantrya*), and that the absolute is free in assuming the manifold, his pioneering metaphysics of dynamism, in which the absolute is intrinsically full of potential and constantly pulsating, in a sense, constantly unfolding with novelty. Rather than claiming originality for his thoughts, he cited the Āgamic testimonies that preceded him and traced the worlds of his preceptors.[3] New thinking, for him, did not come from a vacuum, and even a simple representation went beyond being a mere copy, bearing the marks of originality.

Abhinavaguptian cosmology is a synthesis of various Āgamas that rests on the sixfold courses (*adhvan*), divided into two triads of the course of time (*kālādhvan*) and that of space (*deśādhvan*). There are three categories in the provenance of time: phonemes, words, and sentences; and three nested in the course of space: aspects (*kalā*), principles (*tattvas*), and the spheres (*bhuvanas*). This metrification uniquely grounds phonetic expression as coextensive to the planes of manifestation, and the relation of the world extends beyond the word to sonic vibration. For Abhinava, the entire cosmos is an extension of "I-am" (*aham*), the subjectivity that does not emerge in contrast to objectivity but as an acronym of all the phonemes that are

coextensive to the totality of the manifest world. Accordingly, if our being equates with speech, our own subjectivity (*aham*) reflects the totality, and individuation becomes an endless mirroring of the absolute, Śiva consciousness. Terms such as "fullness" (*pūrṇatā*), "total I-am-ness" (*pūrṇāhantā*), or the state of becoming Bhairava[4] describe the final modes of realization wherein the absolute is equated with consciousness that is dynamic, that is constantly unfolding and folding, or that is constantly pulsating (*spanda*), with the manifold being the inherent nature of the singular. In Abhinava's monistic cosmology, the first dyad of Śiva and Śakti constitute a singular reality of consciousness with inherent reflexivity, and this dyad circumscribes all the other dyads of subject and object, speech and reference, consciousness and matter, mind and the body, and so on.[5] Unique to Abhinavaguptian monism is the metaphysical foundation that the absolute is inherently dynamic, and that the manifold is not erased even in the absolute singularity. In other words, one and many do not pose a dichotomy in this all-embracing totality. That is, the inherent freedom of Śiva makes possible what is otherwise impossible in constituting and sustaining difference within the singularity of Śiva, which in turn is absolute consciousness or the self, constantly pulsating and experiencing, constantly attaining novelty. Śiva's freedom exceeds a mere mirroring, as it articulates in the expression of the manifold an ever-newness in every mode of manifestation.

In opposition to the extremes of reductionist materialism and subjective illusionism, Abhinava presents the world as an expression of Śiva—an embodiment of pure consciousness and being—while also accepting the manifold as real modes of becoming. That is, the reality of becoming is not subordinate to that of being. Deeply rooted in Somānanda's pantheism,[6] Biernacki argued that Abhinavagupta adopted the model of panentheism that is centered on a foundational subjectivity or a single reality of Śiva that "unfolds out of itself the wonderful diversity of our world" and relates this model of cosmology with new materialism.[7] Abhinava of course rejected the reductionist paradigm of inertia that explains consciousness, life, and subjective experiences relying on emergentism, the thesis that mind and mental world are nonexistent properties in matter that inexplicably emerge from inertia. At the same time, he did not succumb to the alternative route of subjective idealism or illusionism that results in either rejection of external reality and confirmation of the singular being and consciousness or rejecting both the structure and its foundation, leading to absolute emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of being and things. The world, for Abhinava, is not a mistaken identity, but rather an expression of the inherent potencies of the self or Śiva. The absolute, accordingly, is the resting ground for all the apparent dichotomies.

It would be foolhardy to cage Abhinavaguptian philosophy in one or another contemporary paradigm. To begin with, his works do not even strictly adhere to a single then-existing model. He did not, however, relinquish traditional boundaries, as he was primarily explaining others' works. His model of syncretism envelops varied tantric schools of Kula, Krama, Trika, and Mahārtha or Spanda.[8] But more than that, he borrowed ideas from Sautrāntika Yogācāra as readily as he did from the Upaniṣadic corpus or from the philosophy of Bhartṛhari.[9] Above all, his monism firmly stands on the early Āgamas and Siddhānta literature, and to read Abhinava in isolation of these foundational texts is akin to expecting rain without clouds. Unique to Abhinava is that he read all categories, including Śiva, within the fold of materiality, but at the same time, he opened the space for Parama Śiva, a transcendent category. Likewise, he explained the succession of becoming in a twelvefold wheel of Kālī, accepting in a sense that the absolute in itself is in succession, but at the same time, allows space for the transcendent or the thirteenth category as presiding over the wheel of succession. If we follow Kṣemarāja's gloss that "those following the system (tantra) consider the self as transcendent to the world. Those situated in the transmissions of Kaula etc. consider the self as immanent. And those following the philosophies such as Trika consider [the self-essence] as both transcendent and immanent,"[10] Abhinava's works intersect with all these models. While some of the theoretical quagmire comes from the lack of serious studies of these intricacies, there is another domain of Abhinava, his mystical side, that does not demand the same coherence to be expressed in words. For him, deeper domains of consciousness resolved the apparent dichotomies that transcend everyday expression

and conceptualization. This is to argue that, in order to understand Abhinava, one has to not only excel in logic but also needs to practice what he taught.

As I have suggested above, Abhinava's cosmology is an elaboration on early Āgamas and the works of Somānanda and Utpala. For Somānanda, the world and Śiva are like the gold and its ornaments. That is, the manifold is not something imposed on Śiva, but it is Śiva as it is, in its very manifest form. Somānanda argued:

> It is not mental construction that operates as regards this [universe] consisting of the Earth principle, etc., since the [Śiva principle] is formed precisely in this manner. If something is conceived of as different from what it is, then we can speak of mental construction. But is that [Earth, etc.] conceived of different from what it is? If [mental construction] concerns something real, then mental construction is just a word [without content].[11]

Common among the classical metaphors to describe causality include milk and yogurt, mirage, or that of rope and snake. If the first seeks a direct correlation between the cause and the effect, the second rejects what is being projected, whereas the third affirms the basis on which something is projected. Even though the example of gold and ornaments runs parallel to that of milk and yogurt, there is real change in the chemical structure when the milk turns into yogurt. Another common metaphor is that of the ocean and its tides, describing difference on the basis of conceptualization and articulation. If similar terminology, such as *māyā*, is to be found in this paradigm, that only describes the marvelous powers inherent in the absolute. The model of causality that Abhinava adopted is that of emergence or "manifestation" (*abhivyakti*), that is, traits that are inherent in the cause are not expressed in their latent state, but are expressed when the proper conditions are met. A sesame seed has the potential to become a plant and produce flowers and seeds and so does an apple seed. However, a sesame does not have the potential to become an apple tree and vice versa. Śiva or the absolute, on the other hand, possesses all potentials and therefore retains all latencies in their seminal form.

The "manifestation" (*abhivyakti*) model of causality in the Abhinavaguptian paradigm contrasts two different theories: the Sāṅkhya[12] model of *satkārya*, the concept that the effect is already in the cause or that an effect is merely a new arrangement and not a chemical alteration; and the early Ājīvika and the materialist models that utilize the concept to affirm some forms of reductionist materialism. This comes in dialogue with early Śaiva models and the Nyāya[13] model of causality that considers God instrumental in creation. Even though Sāṅkhya and early Śaiva philosophies are dualistic, materiality and mutation in the Sāṅkhya paradigm are not mediated by a transcendent agent. In the process of refining Somānanda's pantheism, a new model of causality, the model of manifestation (*abhivyakti*) enters the field, with the maxims that all the traits of what manifests are in causal form, and that there is no separation between consciousness and the matter. Śiva's agency is not external to the material world, as Śiva resides within everything. Rather than confirming the claims of physicalist emergentism, this new application of "manifestation" or emergence underscores the idea that something nonexistent cannot come into being, and there must be something within the existing entities that makes it possible for consciousness to emerge. Deviating from the Sāṅkhya understanding that materiality is an effect with a direct transformation of the *guṇas*, whereas consciousness or *puruṣa* is mirrored, intermingled without being affected on its own in this process of materialization,[14] the "manifestation" in Abhinavaguptian perspective underscores the thesis that effect and the cause are not materially distinct for this does not explain the inherent traits that manifest in the effect that already exists in the cause. Most importantly, the central thesis here is that Śiva, the absolute itself, is (1) both the instrumental and material cause and both mind and the matter, and therefore (2) all the traits that are visible in the expressed forms are there in the seminal form in the cause. However, this is not an attempt to negate causality or to collapse effect into cause, as every event of expression introduces novelty, and every expression of being confirms the inherent freedom within the

absolute. Accordingly, the inherent traits of Śiva are recognized in the full blossoming of all aspects in the manifold modes of expression, making "recognition" (*pratyabhijñāna*) a binary process of recognizing both plurality and singularity.

We are used to a dogmatic interpretation of the thesis that (1) Śiva is pure consciousness, and that (2) the manifold worlds are expressions of materiality along the lines that consciousness is something sublime and immaterial or nonphysical. On the contrary, we come closer to understanding pure consciousness and its manifold manifestations if we think of a lump of clay with all the possible shapes that can be carved, the early metaphor of gold and ornaments, or the "mass of consciousness" as the "mass of ice" that melts and flows and turns into rivers and fills the lakes, and the flowing water as the manifold. Just as the singularity of the lump, gold, or ice does not contradict the endless manifestations of possible shapes, the manifold manifestation in the world does not pose a dichotomy with the singularity of Śiva. Our accustomed causality crumbles when engaged with the cosmology of thirty-six principles, as there are nine principles (*tattvas*) above time (*kāla*) in the metaphysics through which Abhinavagupta is working.[15] In other words, temporal manifestation collapses to make sense above the categories after the collapse of time, so the issue of "when" Śiva and Śakti separated does not refer to a temporal when. Our understanding of "event" also needs critical examination, for the event of the collapse of time, a nontemporal event of the stimulation of volition, or the emergence of the principles being separated from the singularity of Śiva cannot be described by relying on spatiotemporal concepts. At the same time, we lack any alternative paradigm to the categories of thoughts or forming concepts that escape the spatiotemporal parameters. Further complexity ensues, with the principle of time (*kāla*) itself falling under the "course of space" (*deśādhvan*); the time with which we are familiar or can conceptualize is the time that has already been spatialized. But this is just the beginning of touching on the esoteric heart of tantric cosmology. And without addressing the phonetic mysticism that is central to Abhinava's PTV, we cannot decipher the esoteric domains of tantric cosmology.

Central to PTV are the concepts of (1) a dialogical constitution of reality (Timalsina 2014), (2) phonetic coextension of categories, and (3) polyvalence of what it means to be the absolute or *anuttara*. From Abhinava's perspective, the nontemporal dialogue between Śiva and Śakti not only constitutes our everyday reality, but also envelops the fivefold acts that covers emergence to grace within this primordial dialogue. This dialogue is a metaphor for another metaphor: of illumination (*prakāśa*) and reflexivity (*vimarśa*) that underscores the self-aware nature of consciousness that is not only constantly revealing the manifest entities, but also recognizing reality as it unfolds. This is neither a metaphysics grounded on inertia, nor metaphysics based on external causation. Underscoring dynamism, there is never suspension of dialogue between Śiva and Śakti. According to Abhinava: "If Śiva were to remain in a singular form [without any change], He would abnegate his Lordship and his essential character of pure consciousness and be like a pot."[16] The primordial dialogue goes beyond metaphysics and addresses epistemology, underscoring a dialogical manifestation of intentional consciousness. Moreover, this also addresses soteriology as the revelation of the words here that are in dialogue, and words embody the nature of the absolute. Yet again, creation and creator do not pose a dichotomy, even if the words and their agent expressing words are different entities. The intricate relation between word and meaning that underscores Bhartṛhari's philosophy was further embellished by Abhinava with the expressed and the expression, where the meaning and the word constitute a singular body like conjoined twins whose identity is not to be collapsed to a single person, but they also are not two separate entities. All polarities of word and meaning, of matter and consciousness, of body and mind, and of teacher and disciple are summed up in this singular constitution of *aham* or "I am" that stands for Śiva and Śakti, the illuminating and reflexive modes of consciousness that embody the totality. Also central to this dialogue is the concept of "relation." In both TA and PTV, Abhinava deemed it necessary to outline six levels of relations that mediate the revelation of the absolute, starting from the relation that seeks difference within singularity, extended all the way down to the relation that seeks unity between two manifestly different entities: Just as the transcendent (*para*) relation describes the inseparable identity of Śiva and Śakti where difference is imposed for the sake of dialogue, the sixth-level

dialogue at the bottom between a human teacher and a student, a "nondivine" (*adivya*) relation underscores the need for a homogeneous space between divergent subjectivities for the sake of dialogue. In all accounts, the hierarchical relation in successive layers describes the manifestation of the same absolute in lesser degrees, similar to a lamp shrouded with multiple veils. But even then, all these relations mirror the "inseparability" (*avinābhāva*) between Śiva and Śakti.

We need to explore further the capacity of words, particularly articulated speech, in constituting and not just representing reality. For that, we need to engage the philosophy of Bhartṛhari, Kumārila, and Prabhākara that provide the basis for Abhinavagupta's understanding of the word. Taking Bhartṛhari's statement further: "The beginningless and endless word principle that does not change manifests (*vivartate*) in the form of meaning, wherein the process of the world begins" (*Vākyapadīya* I.1). Abhinava equates the word with the world and, even more, finds coextension between phonemes and expressed reality. The concept of the phonetic coextension of reality uniquely places Abhinavagupta's philosophy within the domain of mysticism, rigorously defended by sharp Nyāya logic-based epistemology. In Sanskrit, the first phoneme, *a*, and the final phoneme, *ha*, if combined as in an acronym, constitute "*ah*"; if combined with *m*, which symbolically stands for the union or coming together, which Abhinava graphically depicted as "banging together" (*saṃghaṭṭa*), constitute *aham*, which translates as "I" or "I-am." Underlying this phonetic symbolism is a twofold concept: the collective subjectivity of Śiva and the individuated embodied subjectivity within the manifold. If the subjectivity of Śiva underscores the world as the body and the I-am, thereby collectively expressing the totality, embodied subjectivity among the individuated beings extends throughout the epidermis. But what is noteworthy is, the subjectivity here, in accounts of both the divine and human subjects, is not in isolation of the world or the body. On the contrary, the world is the body, and the body is the world. Furthermore, even in its delimited state, consciousness or the essential subjectivity is not bereft of all the aspects of the absolute, and the modes of becoming, the individuated selves, are always free to reflect back and regain the identity with the totality.

Now comes the issue of grounding the absolute subject in this cosmology, and, for this matter, we need to revisit the concept of the absolute in terms of the "unsurpassable," *anuttara* in Abhinavaguptian terms. Abhinavagupta playfully elaborated on this category as both the core of phonetic mysticism and the nature of the absolute in his philosophy. This *anuttara* as a category explains the most esoteric and one of the most difficult concept in Abhinava's philosophy that the absolute both transcends the totality and at the same time is manifest in each and every particle of the manifest reality. This paradoxical nature of the *anuttara* is explicit in Abhinava's sixteenfold etymology of the term *anuttara.* It will not be contextual to itemize all those etymologies for our current conversation. However, what is essential for this conversation is that the concept of *anuttara* or the absolute, in a playful morphology of Abhinavagupta, acts to explain phonetic mysticism, Trika epistemology, pantheism, panentheism, and varied forms of nondualism as embodied concepts within his all-enveloping cosmology. With the etymology "of which there is nothing more or exceeding" (*na vidyate uttaram adhikaṃ yataḥ*), Abhinava describes absolute consciousness as one with Bhairava that is absolutely free in being self-manifest, with all the principles being dependent upon this absolute consciousness for their confirmation. This absolute, in his paradigm (based on the tenth–twelfth etymologies), transcends all the triadic structures, including the triad of the expression of speech in its forms of *paśyantī*, *madhyamā* and *vaikharī* or that of the deities in various groupings.[17] Abhinava explains *anuttara* further to explain phonetic mysticism, highlighting "the transcendence of the phoneme *a*" (marked with a single drop "."), where it reaches to the extent of *visarga* that is marked with double drops ":" (following the fifteenth meaning). In other words, the cosmogenesis in Abhinavaguptian paradigm is coextensive of phonogenesis, that the absolute expresses itself in the form of the first phoneme, which stands for pure consciousness, and its first articulation stands for the articulate bliss; it further expresses itself in the form of volition and so on, giving rise to embodied subjectivity that parallels the creation of the cosmos.[18] These conversations repeatedly lead to the idea of something being transcendent, not merely immanent, that is self-manifest and is endowed with the potencies to give rise to the manifold. If all is one

and one is all, there is nothing that is not interlinked with the other. But at the same time, just like the singularity does not erase plurality, the manifest plurality does not contradict the absolute unity. In other words, if Abhinavaguptian mysticism is an attempt to directly experience this multivalent reality that is simultaneously singular and plural, his epistemology is an effort to rationally explain everyday experience in light of this all-encompassing experience that manifests in the modes of recognizing reality (*pratyabhijñāna*).

Abhinavaguptian Epistemology

While there are some crucial epistemic issues that Abhinava's monistic metaphysics invites, some of the enduring issues, such as the gap between matter and consciousness, are already broached here. The same applies to self-manifestation of consciousness, as the central Abhinavaguptian thesis is that of consciousness inherently having the binary nature of illumination (*prakāśa*) and reflexivity (*vimarśa*) where these two aspects are subsumed within consciousness as being its twofold modes. In other words, the Abhinavaguptian paradigm inverts the mainstream philosophical positions that rest on the aforementioned chiasm in explaining how the world is given to consciousness and how the dichotomy between the self and the other is maintained so that the transaction in the world becomes possible. The challenge here is not that of how the self reaches to the other or how consciousness grasps inertia, but rather how individuation is possible and how the distinction between subject and object is grounded, so that the worldly transaction becomes possible. In other words, the epistemological challenge here is not about breaching the gap between subject and object, but rather of constituting subjectivity and objectivity in the field of singular consciousness. The categories such as "manifestation" (*ābhasa*) or "mirroring" (*pratibimba*) are overused, as the same terms are exploited in the contexts of Yogācāra Buddhism, the Advaita of Śaṅkara, and also in the philosophy of Abhinavagupta.[19] A haphazard generalization certainly leads to misinterpretation of diverging concepts, for these terms are not referring to the same epistemic process in recognizing reality. Mirroring, for instance, does not just describe the "mirroring of the external in the mind," as it also stands for the process of assuming the manifold and maintaining externality. The metaphor here explains that, just as in each and every account of mirroring, the same entity is perceived as many, and the mirror image transcends what it is mirroring, every mode of manifestation stands uniquely, as if isolated from its singular source, the base consciousness. Consciousness, in this paradigm, has the challenge of escaping its singularity and projecting something to be external and something to be different, and the mirror metaphor is exclusively used for this purpose and not to reject the modes of manifestation as in Advaita or to reject its basis as found in Yogācāra. The same applies to the concept of "manifestation" (*ābhāsa*). Recognition (*pratyabhijñāna*), along these lines, is an epistemic process of grounding absolute consciousness in every single mode of its manifestation and not just describing a nontemporal self. In the act of recognition, the subject does not confront a merely external entity but rather blends this consciousness with what is primordially given in the prejudgmental state, which is the very self-mirroring consciousness attaining the manifold, manifesting as subject and object. In this account, memory is not just woven in the fabric of consciousness, as is the case of judgmental consciousness, but it is presented in the form of memory blended within the very presentation of immediate consciousness.

As Ratie (2017, 212) highlighted, central to the concept of mirroring here is that "consciousness is capable of manifesting diversity while remaining unitary, just as a mirror can show multiple reflections without being shattered." In the Abhinavaguptian paradigm, the mirror metaphor primarily serves two purposes: the manifoldness of a singular entity and the incomplete or unfulfilled (*apūrṇa*) sense of the mirror image. The first, assuming the manifold, describes the plurality of subjects, just like the sun being mirrored and appearing manifold. Whether the mirror image is real is not an issue here, as the example is only used to describe the manifold. The second, the sense of incompleteness, rests on the concept of "appearance" (*khyāti*), that everyday consciousness has the sense of incompleteness or that there is always some covering

that blurs our vision of the absolute, and therefore, while the totality is always manifest, it remains as if hidden from the purview of everyday experience. Nemec (2012) and Rastogi (1986) thoroughly examined the issue of incomplete manifestation (*apūrṇatākhyāti*). What this "incomplete manifestation" theory of error underscores is an alternative to the premise that (1) all manifestations are real, and (2) all manifestations are unreal. Prabhākara, for instance, maintained that what manifests during the mode of error is nonmanifestation (*akhyāti*) of the difference between memory and direct apprehension, which in turn gives rise to a conjoined entity of the commixture of memory and direct apprehension, basically leading to the conclusion that the entity being manifest is not unreal, only that the conceptual blending constitutes an erroneous object. Other philosophers broadly rejected the idea that what is being manifest during the mode of error is a real entity. While other theories are applicable to explain objective errors, Abhinavaguptian error theory also applies to explaining subjective error, as individuated subjects have a deep-seated notion of incompleteness, striving in the world, seeking fulfillment by means of savoring external entities that gives a momentary sense of union and thus a sense of completeness.

As I have suggested previously, crucial to Abhinavaguptian epistemology is the concept of freedom (*svātantrya*) that goes beyond explaining cosmogenesis to describing individuation, intersubjectivity, embodiment, and everyday modes of consciousness. The freedom inherent in Śiva or pure consciousness, including the delimited modes of consciousness as encountered in everyday experience, also grounds difference and relation, central epistemic issues to bridge the chiasm between the subjective and objective poles. The concept of freedom helps us ground an epistemology that not only describes veridical consciousness, but also provides a soteriology that distinguishes freedom of consciousness from its determined and discrete emanations. Metaphysically, this describes the freedom of Śiva, or the freedom inherent in pure consciousness that constitutes absolute subjectivity (Śiva himself) that gives rise to the manifold. Epistemically, the same consciousness, even in its individuated state, performs the same acts of creation and dissolution, giving rise to a sense of externality and difference, maintaining the distinctness of entities as they are constituted or given to consciousness, and eventually dissolving difference in the very foundational consciousness. Given that this concept of freedom metaphysically underscores a shift from an earlier paradigm of stasis when it attributes dynamism to the absolute or the self, and also that subjectivity and sentience define the inherent freedom within the absolute, the epistemic issues such as the plasticity of consciousness are simultaneously resolved to manifest in myriad forms, as in imagination and error or in everyday consciousness, all directed toward other subjects and objects. This concept of freedom likewise grasps the subjectivity of other subjects as well as recognizing objects as objects, maintaining difference at the phenomenal level while also stressing absolute homogeneity.[20] Embedded within the concept of freedom is also the idea of intentionality or of consciousness being directed toward something external. As Ratie (2016) argued:

> A consciousness that would not be free would not be conscious at all because it would be incapable of any extroversion (real or apparent) toward any Other: it would remain riveted to a self-contained identity, incapable of being anything besides itself, and therefore incapable of any relationship with anything—including the object. Intentionality entails the freedom not to remain confined to one's own nature, the freedom that consists in not "being merely oneself (*ātmamātratā*) contrary to insentient objects."

Intertwined with the concept of freedom are the issues of memory and recognition. While freedom explains the reflexive nature of consciousness, that is, consciousness does not depend on anything else, even second-order consciousness, to grasp itself, this category helps to recontextualize memory and recognition, primarily by rejecting Dharmakīrtian arguments of reflexivity, memory, and recognition.[21] From the Dharmakīrtian perspective, no permanent substrate (or the self) is required to explain memory, as residual traces (*samskara*) or cognitive imprints (*vāsanās*) mediate between consciousness and memory. Even though this response does address the object, it fails to address the sense, the act of experiencing, that is evoked

during the mode of recollection. If consciousness is self-aware, it should also be merely the grasping and not that which is grasped. Accordingly, consciousness could never be a thing but would always remain a reflexive entity. As a consequence, memory would be about not only the past object but also the experience that is not terminated instantaneously. At the heart of this argument lies the thesis of "recognition' (*pratyabhijñā*) that underscores the atemporal nature of reflexive consciousness that is inherently free. But this confirmation does not stand in negation of what manifests as temporal, the finality of past entities given to recognition and the contemporaneity of immediate experience. In other words, temporal expression of consciousness remains unassailed, making everyday life intrinsically woven within the absolute. The concept of freedom in this paradigm underscores a shift from life as suffering to sport: Rather than the world being a miserable trap, being repeatedly reproduced and relived according to mental imprints and mental traces that one should escape at all costs, the world in this altered paradigm becomes a playful expression of the absolute self, and the manifold becomes an artistic expression of the singular reality. And indeed, playfulness appears deeply embedded within the inherent nature of sentient beings, and the struggles and pains occurring during these playful activities appear trivial.

The fundamental paradox that Abhinava's philosophy faces is, on the one hand, he maintains that all is one; on the other hand, he advocates that there are real external objects and what we conceive of in everyday consciousness is not error or illusion or simulacra of momentary consciousness. Ratie (2011) thoroughly examined this argument, evaluating the debate between the Sautrāntikas and Utpala/Abhinava. It is sufficient to say here that the paradigm in which Abhinava rejected illusionism while also accepting externality as directly given underscores the philosophical position that calls into question both dualism and subjective illusionism. All the central issues in his philosophy, (1) that consciousness is reflexive and it does not require second-order consciousness for its verification; (2) that externals are contingent on consciousness' confirmation for their being; and (3) that consciousness is the absolute reality, and the externals are its "manifestation" (*ābhāsa*), "mirroring" (*pratibimba*), or emergence (*abhivyakti*); all lead to subjective idealism, and these claims are eerily close to the Yogācāra–Sautrāntika arguments. But Abhinava redefined the categories and developed an epistemic system to overcome the above objections while at the same time adhering to his monistic philosophy. While Abhinava had his own position to defend, he rejected the Sautrāntika argument that the externals do exist but are not apprehended, only that they are given inferentially. Abhinava argued an inferred cause must have been previously perceived. When we infer fire on the basis of smoke, the invariability of smoke and fire has been previously established during the moment when they are apprehended together. Sautrāntikas argued that there is no aforementioned invariability for we do see externals by the instrumentality of the eyes without them being previously perceived. Utpala and Abhinava rejected this argument, saying that the instrumentality of eyes in perceiving color is not based on inference but on direct apprehension. The argument is that if the causality of the eyes were never directly apprehended, we also could never establish causality on the basis of inference. The argument with regard to externality of entities of perception is that anything that consciousness grasps as other than itself is given to consciousness as external, making "inside" and "outside" an epistemic game rather than a metaphysical position. In other words, anything that consciousness objectifies is external to consciousness. The internal-external relation that applies to other entities, for example Russian dolls, is not the same with consciousness and its objects. In the case of consciousness and its objects, anything consciousness objectifies is "not consciousness but something else," while this does not apply to other inside-outside relations: The entities that are inside a house are not the house, for example. This necessitates a two-tier analysis of consciousness where the absolute consciousness circumscribes all that is there, collapsing the boundaries of subject and object, whereas phenomenal consciousness finds its horizon by means of externality, and at this level, it can grasp only what is an object or what is external to itself. But even then, what is given as utterly different, as fully external, is merely the way consciousness determines an entity to be. In a sense, the container metaphor for the analysis is extremely narrow, and this, as well as the inside-outside game, rest on the epistemology within the parameters of our biology, the way our body is cultured to grasp and interpret the ecology, rather than grounding epistemology on some disembodied or nonrelational

metaphysics. Therefore, issues such as the phenomenology of pain are trivial here, as if when our consciousness grasps pain as external, it is external, but if it incorporates pain within the scope of subjectivity, pain then remains integral to consciousness.

Abhinavaguptian Soteriology

Many aspects of Abhinavaguptian soteriology are borrowed from early Siddhānta or dualistic Śaiva theologies. While it has been fashionable to read Abhinavagupta in isolation from the early Āgamas, the fact of the matter is that, like any other philosopher and theologian, Abhinava was a product of his own history. His major works are commentarial, and even his independent treatises broadly rely on one or another of the Āgamas. Moreover, his was an approach of reconciliation, as is evident in his *Bhagavadgītā* commentary or in his independent treatise, *Paramārthasāra*. Pan-Śaivite concepts that Abhinava addressed and integrated into his system include not only the broader concepts such as liberation (*mokṣa*) or self-realization (*ātmajñāna*) or scriptural authority or the requirement of a preceptor that intersects various traditions, but also the categories of initiation (*dīkṣā*) or the beliefs and practices surrounding *mantras*, or the concept of the emission of powers (*śaktipāta*), or the concept of grace (*anugraha*). Central to Abhinavaguptian soteriology is the praxis derived from *Mālinīvijayottara* (MVT), the threefold structure of the means (*upāya*) primarily based on the transformation of volition, cognition, and action, namely the *śāṃbhava*, *śākta*, and *āṇava* means of self-realization.[22] If the essence of the means of volition (*śāṃbhava upāya*) is the surge of pure will, the means of cognition (*śākta* upāya) rest on refinement of thought or an analytic process wherein correct reasoning (*sattarka*) helps one realize by cognitive means that the absolute is given in everyday reality. The final means, the means of action (*āṇava upāya*) accordingly rest on transformation of the powers of action.

MVT introduces threefold means in order to attain *samāveśa*: (1) an "entry into Śiva or pure consciousness," the sought-after altered state of consciousness that transforms limited gaze, and the course involves "penetration" (*vedha*) from the lower to higher states of consciousness or the surge of Kuṇḍalinī from the lower to higher centers, and (2) the experience is described as sudden (*haṭha*) intermingling or (3) harmony (*sāmarasya*), referring to the "coupled" (*yāmala*) state of Śiva and Śakti principles. The state described in graphically embodied terms is a means to the end of ending bondage that Abhinava described in terms of the bondage of the mind (*bauddha*) and the bondage of individuality (*pauṃsna*). Rather than self-realization being a sudden and single-step process, this paradigm underscores it as a cumulative process wherein our bodily instincts and habits are inversed through external means, mental constructs are corrected, and proper vision is developed through analytical process; eventually pure will is generated to invert the gaze from a determined and limited individuality to the pure being of boundless consciousness, described in terms of universal bliss (*jagadānanda*). The threefold means of absorption are directed toward cultivating proper will (*icchā*), refining the cognitive process by means of developing an analytical process that allows the mind to grasp the entire epistemic process of grasping objects (*jñāna*); recognizing embodied states as pure expression of being and consciousness; and transforming bodily being into Śiva consciousness (*kriyā upāya*).

While at times the three means based on volition, cognition, and action can be applied simultaneously or successively, it also appears that any of these means in isolation suffices to grant liberation. Moreover, there can be a means of no means (*anupāya*), for according to Abhinava, the self is of the nature of consciousness, which is metaphorically described as light that does not depend on other lights for its manifestation. This is where the concept of absorption is intertwined with that of "the emission of powers by Śiva" (*śaktipāta*).

Overhyped and highly commercialized in modern times, the idea of *śaktipāta* relates to divine grace, that only Śiva is capable of retrieving his externalized gaze or reveal the essential nature. Most manuals of

tantric practice integrate all the approaches grounded on the extension of volition, refinement of the analytical aspect of consciousness by means of successive gaze on thoughts from their most external to internal horizons, the refinement of motor functions of the breath and the body, and meticulous visualization practices. In some accounts, a single practice can be applied at different levels and relate to different means of absorption. For example, the Sūtra "by returning to the great lake [of consciousness], one experiences the vigor of mantras" (Śivasūtra I.22) is read in the section that relates to the means of volition and describes the state of merging into a higher state of consciousness, but it also relates to refinement of thought processes, and at the same time, it also relates to mantric articulation.

Moving beyond pure volition, philosophical discussion, epistemology in particular, becomes part of the śākta upāya, as what it involves is a meticulous analysis of an emergence of object-directed consciousness and its retrieval to its primordial ground. Even this refinement by means of discursive thought rests on the "emission of powers": If the will of Śiva or the absolute is to reveal His absolute nature, the refinement takes a proper course and one uses "reasoning" (tarka), the highest among the limbs of yoga, for turning the gaze inward from its external surge. Needless to say, all these means are identified not to discover something new or to create something original. The processes of rediscovering Śiva by means of pure will, refined thought, and purified action are all meant for revealing the intrinsic nature (svabhāva) of oneself as Śiva or pure consciousness and to acknowledge one's bodily being as a playful act of the totality, eventually harmonizing everyday life with liberation. It is while being in the world that the self is realized, and the self that is realized is not isolated from the body or the world. The world, accordingly, is not a miserable place that one should strive to escape by all means. Instead, one should strive to live a full life, acknowledging one's own engagement in the world as the playful act of the absolute.

Tantric practices use maṇḍala practice mostly for śākta and āṇava means. From the approach of the means of cognition, "the wheel of śaktis" (śakticakra) describes the absolute at the center, with different cognitive and emotional states that all refer to the instances of luminous consciousness, manifest in varied forms, being placed in different circles. Maṇḍala is a graphic representation of both mantra and the deity, and in visualization practices, it becomes the template for the universe as well as the body. Entering into maṇḍala or visualizing maṇḍala, in this account, is engaging one's own corporeal manifestation and cognitive and emotional states that are the metaphoric rays of the self that is the sun or the metaphoric ripples of the oceanic self. In all accounts, the layers in a maṇḍala are not to describe a hierarchy based on dualities but rather a collectivity where different parts or aspects have different functions, while the collective constitutes a unique field not to be reduced into parts or their distinctive functions.

All the rituals and practices that can be observed relate to the means of action (āṇava upāya). This includes all forms of visualization, mantra practices, synchronization of mantra with breath (repeating the phonemes of mantra that match the temporal digits [mātrā] occupied in the process of breathing), and the localization or installation of different phonemes and mantras within the body. Even though the idea is to reorient habitual tendencies that are deeply rooted in the nexus of the mind and the body, externalized practices allow the aspirants to recognize the fundamental characteristic of consciousness in order to constitute reality by means of visualization or imagination.[23] It is in these graphic visualizations that we see a confluence of Abhinavaguptian aesthetics with tantric mysticism, and the rasa or aesthetic savoring merges here in the exhilarated bliss of experiencing fullness (pūrṇatā). As has been said, the image of Bhairava stands for the highest possible state of experiencing fullness, the exalted mode of experience that encompasses everything within while still maintaining the transcendent gaze.[24]

In essence, the philosophy of Abhinavagupta that primarily rests on early Āgamas and the teachings of Somānanda and Utpala uniquely places itself in contrast to various forms of dualism and subjective illusionism. He demonstrated openness to embrace ideas from all fronts but at the same time critiqued the arguments that he deemed unwholesome. Abhinava succeeded in providing a philosophical framework for the Āgamic rituals, whereas Kumārila failed to do so for the Vedic ones. Accordingly, his philosophy

exceptionally embraces emotions and embodied experience as part and parcel of the absolute, and views being in the world, savoring worldly pleasure, as not counterintuitive to self-realization. He even considered that painful experiences have the same essential Śiva nature and engaged with the world through savoring sensory bliss as integral to the totality of our being. If there is poetry in his philosophical presentation, there is deep philosophical underpinning in his poetic expression. If he gave a rigorous analysis of mysticism, he mystified some of the most apparent practices. Resting on an all-encompassing foundation, Abhinava argued for the sameness of all philosophies and all means of realization and all substances, and above all, the sameness of all beings of all conditions.[25] But the final words on Abhinavagupta's philosophy rest on both the centrality of freedom in his metaphysics and the concept of inherent dynamism within the absolute that makes creativity and novelty possible in every level, be it phenomenal or absolute.

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Notes

1   For a detailed discussion of Abhinava's life, works, and philosophy, see Pandey 1963.

2   For an introduction to Abhinavaguptian aesthetics, read Pollock 2016. For the interconnection between aesthetics and tantric mysticism, read Timalsina 2007, 2015, 2020a, 2020c, and 2021. For Abhinava on *śānta rasa*, see Raghavan 1975 and Timalsina 2020.

3   Most noteworthy of this tendency is when he claimed: "There exists nothing [new] that does not exist in the

Mālinīvijayottara" (*na tad astīha yan na śrīmālinīvijayottare*| Tantrāloka I.17ab, claiming his magnum opus to be an exposition of already existing concepts found in the Mālinī text. This tendency is equally visible in the Vivaraṇa on Parātrīśikā, where he cites Somānanda. Since the Vimarśinī texts on Īśvarapratyabhijñā are commentarial, there is no need for him to make such a claim. A general tendency here is to disavow originality. But at the same time, Abhinavagupta recognizes creative intuition (*pratibhā*) as revealing something constantly in new forms.

4   Bhairava is a tantric deity. However, in the philosophy of Abhinavagupta, the term *bhairava* denotes the absolute, the ultimate state of consciousness, or the liberated state wherein the subject recognizes the totality as his own body while still having the transcendental gaze, thus making it possible for having the consciousness transcendent to the world (*viśvottīrṇa*) and immanent (*viśvamaya*).

5   I have addressed elsewhere (2020b) in detail the Abhinavaguptian philosophy of subjectivity and his analysis of *aham.*

6   For discussion, see Nemec 2014.

7   From the manuscript of Biernacki's book, *The Matter of Wonder: Abhinavagupta's Panentheism and New Materialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

8   For different Śaiva schools, see Sanderson 2009.

9   For discussion, see Ferrante 2020.

10   *Viśvottīrṇam ātmatattvam iti tāntrikāḥ | viśvamayam iti kulādyāmnāyaniviṣṭāḥ| viśvottīrṇam viśvamayam iti ca trikādidarśanavidaḥ|* In the autocommentary of *Pratyabhijñāhṛdaya*, Sūtra 8.

11   *Śivadṛṣṭi* III.82cd-83, translation, Torella 2014. For a detailed analysis of Somānanda's pantheism, read Nemec 2014.

12   For an introduction to Sāṅkhya philosophy, read Larson 2011. For an overview of the Ājīvakas, read Basham 1951.

13   For an introduction to Nyāya, read Phillips 2021 and Ganeeri 2021.

14   For further analysis of *abhivyakti* in Utpala and Abhinava's philosophy, see Ratie 2014.

15   The Sāṅkhya system accepts twenty-five categories. In addition to these, the Trika system adds eleven new categories wherein Śiva as both the Absolute and pure consciousness in its role of illumination; Śakti, the divine consort and also the reflexive nature of consciousness; Sadāśiva, again the divine form where five faces of Śiva assume a single iconic form but at the same time the state of consciousness wherein consciousness is both inward and outward, both reflecting on consciousness itself and also recognizing difference; Īśvara, the divine form as well as the state of consciousness that consolidates externality while at the same time experiences the totality; *śuddhavidyā*, or the pure wisdom where the rise of an event of consciousness is not determined by limited knowledge; *māyā*, or the illusive power of Śiva as well as the force that delimits consciousness and makes it possible for being determined in objective forms; *avidyā* or ignorance; *kalā* or the determining aspects; *raga* or passion; *kāla* or time; and *niyati* or the restraining force that reflects the karmic collection of an individual in determining the course of embodiment and suffering. Noteworthy in this list are the nine categories that are prior to the manifestation of the category *kāla* or time.

16   *Asthāsyadekarūpeṇa vapuṣā cen maheśvaraḥ| maheśvaratvaṃ saṃvittvaṃ tadatyakṣyat ghaṭādivat||* Tantrāloka III. 100cd-101ab.

17   Āgama texts and the philosophical works on Sanskrit grammar grade speech in varied degrees, and we can find this grading of speech central also to the works of Somānanda and Abhinavagupta. In brief, the expressed or articulated speech is called *vaikharī*. The inner vocalization without an external articulation is called *madhyamā*. The speech that manifests as if inseparable as word and meaning is identified as *paśyantī*, the speech that reflects both outward, toward externalization, and inward, the pristine form of consciousness. There are some arguments regarding the status of the highest speech, but the Trika Śaivas unanimously accepted the fourth state of Parā. Here, this fourth speech needs to be distinguished from the goddess Parā. For discussion of different levels of speech, read Padoux 1990.

18   Padoux (1990) best explicates phonetic mysticism.

19   If we were to identify schools solely based on the term they use for cosmogenesis, all these three schools (Yogācāra, Advaita, and Trika) can be considered Ābhāsavāda. But what they mean by manifestation (ābhāsa) vastly differs among

these schools. For the Yogācārin, the externals (and according to some, even the other minds) are merely the manifestation of momentary consciousness (kṣaṇika vijñāna). For the Advaita of Śaṅkara, the very singular Brahman of the character of pure consciousness is imagined to be many, or manifests (ābhāsa) as objects. For the Trika Śaivas, consciousness is inherently dynamic and to manifest into the manifold is intrinsically given to consciousness. It is just a brief overview, and it would take a book worth of commentary to address this issue properly.

20   For the Śaiva concept of freedom, read Ratie 2016.

21   Central to Dharmakīrtian arguments are nominalism, momentary nature of consciousness as well as person, reality of the externals (the commentarial traditions differ in this account), and most importantly, the collapse between memory and consciousness, considering the character of memory as instance of consciousness itself (see Tillemans 2021). Significant for our context is that Abhinava utilized memory as a valid means of knowledge in establishing the recognition of the self. If memory were not reliable, so also would be recognition (*pratyabhijñā*), which integrates the direct mode of consciousness with memory. From the Dharmamīrtian account, since the person that experienced in the past is not identical to the person that experiences now, this identification and recognition of the self as a valid means of knowledge is flawed. Since Abhinava's efforts through the entire commentarial texts on Īśvara Pratyabhijñā rest on establishing "recognition," one can argue that the central project of Abhinava is to reject the Dharmakīrtian thesis.

22   For conversation on *upāyas*, see Marjanovic 2006.

23   For the application of visualization and imagination in tantra, see Timalsina 2020b.

24   For the symbolism of Bhairava from the Trika perspective, see Timalsina 2013.

25   Read Torella 2015 for the Trika account of sameness, particularly regarding purity and impurity.