

# THE EFFICACY OF SACRIFICE

Correspondences

in the Ṛgvedic Brāhmaṇas

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Sacrifice is a major topic in the study of religious rituals, and one of the issues debated is its possible efficacy. In this study, the need for multiple approaches is acknowledged, but the focus is on the world-view in which a sacrificial practice is embedded, and more specifically on the basic ontological questions that are of importance for it.

The tradition considered in detail is that of the Vedic *brāhmaṇa* texts. In them, the efficacy of sacrifices is mainly explained through correspondences between entities within and outside of the ritual enclosure. In this study, an inventory of all the correspondences in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa *pañcikā* 1–5 is made. Moreover, an examination of their linguistic characteristics is undertaken, and especially of the most frequent form, the nominal sentence. Based on this fundamental research some features of the system of correspondences are analysed. It is shown that the directions of the correspondences are mainly from the ritual realm to categories such as Cosmos, *Varṇa*, Animals and Man. Of these, Man constitutes the most important category, and within it the breaths (i.e. the vital powers of man) occupy a prominent place. Many of the features of the correspondences in Aitareya Brāhmaṇa were confirmed through the comparison with Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa in Chapter 5. However, the directions of the correspondences in Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa are more often reversed, a fact indicating that a change from an emphasis on relation to that of identification has occurred.

In Chapter 6, the special place of the breaths (*prāṇāḥ*) is analysed. It is argued that the frequent use of breath, or the breaths, as the goal of the sacrificial rituals, initiates a process that undermines the intricate system of correspondences. The sacrifice becomes dependent on man both for its efficacy (the knowledge of the correspondences) and for its goal (the vital powers of man). This feature is analysed in the subsequent chapter from the perspective of two central ontological questions: the nature of human acts and the nature of man. The Vedic preoccupation with sacrificial acts evolved into reflection on human acts in general and, due to its focus upon man, on the constitution of the human person. That is, the inquiry into the basis of the efficacy of the act becomes, at the same time, a question of the foundation of the human person (*ātman*) — the agent (*kartṛ*) of the act.

It is further argued that this is a characteristic of many scholarly theories. However, in the Vedic context the development is from a theory of sacrifice to a theory of action, while in most scholarly theories the direction is from a general theory of action to a more specific theory of sacrificial action.

**Keywords:** Sacrifice, Veda, brāhmaṇa, efficacy, ritual, ontology, metaphysics, breath, correspondence, nominal sentence, identification.