Die Lehre von Saltzen muß wohl verstanden werden, weil sie der Grund der ganzen Natur ist: Denn alles, was sich in der Welt befindet, hat Saltz in sich.

Johann Heinrich Zedler (1742: 1300)

Modern wird als Salz üblich Natriumchlorid (NaCl) verstanden und diese Vorstellung auch in einem geschichtlichen Rückblick genutzt, obwohl das nicht unbedenklich ist.

Reinhold F. G. Müller (1965: 61)

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

The famous dialogue between Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī as preserved in two slightly different versions of the Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad (BĀU II 4 ~ BĀU IV 5), contains several similes, some of which can – in my estimation – not be considered as being entirely clear to us. Among them, an outstanding example is the simile drawing upon the dissolution of salt.1 Hardly anybody would, I think, disagree that the simile is indeed unclear in at least a few respects. I have my doubts, however, if the degree to which our misinterpretation might actually extend has really ever been realized. The partial quote2 of only two recent translations,3 which can be considered representative and reliable in that they fully take into account the results of recent research, will suffice for the purpose of briefly pointing out the problem. According to the present state of knowledge as reflected in these works, the illustration (dṛṣṭānta) as given by Yājñavalkya could roughly be represented as follows: a salt chunk, when thrown in water, dissolves completely into that water. One cannot pick it up any more. The water, however, is salty. In other words, the salt must still be there:

sa yathā saindhavakhyā udake prāṣṭa udakam evānvivilīyeta na hasyodgraḥanāya eva syāt | yato yatas tv ādādita lavaṇam eva . . . | (BĀU(K) II 4,12)


It is like this. When *a chunk of salt* is thrown in water, it *dissolves into that very water*, and it cannot be picked up in any way. Yet, from whichever place one may take a sip, the salt is there! (Olivelle 1998: 69)

It is obvious that both the authors tacitly assume two substances necessarily involved in the example, namely, fresh, non-salty drinking water and a quantum of salt which, when added, gives this water a new, characteristic taste of saltiness. They assign to this statement the implicit function of a proof for an actual, though invisible, presence of the added substance ‘salt’ – in the *drśānta*. The element common to this illustration (*drśānta*) and to its subject (*dāṛśāntika*),

... evam vā are idam *mahad bhūtam* anantam apāram vijñānavahana eva | etebhyah⁵
*bhūtebhyaḥ* samutthāya tāṁ evānu vaiśāyi | na pretya saṁjñāśītyaḥ are bravīmi ||
(BAU(K) II 4,12)

remains a matter of dispute. The inherent problems having been given closer consideration are the following: according to Hanefeld’s detailed discussion (pp. 100–115), no really meaningful *tertium comparationis* is discernible.⁶ It seemed, to him, as if the Upaniṣatkarā had erroneously drawn upon two *different substances* in his *drśānta*, namely on salt (*saindhava*) and on water (*udaka*), when actually aiming at an illustration of *substantial identity*.⁷ In any case, it remains equally unclear and disputable as to just whose identity he could have actually referred. A limited agreement in terms of interpretation seems to exist only to the extent that the true object of the example is the attempt at explaining the relationship between the *mahad bhūta* and the *bhūtas*, in my opinion with particular reference to problems connected with ‘disappearance’ (*yatāḥ . . . vi/pūl/ evaṃ . . . vi/pnāṣ*). However, regarding the real meaning covered by these two notions, in particular that covered by ‘bhūta’ (pl.), the correct syntactical splitting of the sentence, as well as the correct interpretation of the grammatical case-ending of *bhūtebhyaḥ* (dative or ablative), the opinions held by scholars can by no means be said to coincide. The translations of the subject of comparison (*dāṛśāntika*) accordingly deviate considerably from each other:


In a footnote (no. 6) to the same page, Hanefeld offers as an alternative translation: