

# Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā: Non-Natural, Moral Realism

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## 1 Introduction

(1) In this lesson, we shall review ethics as explained in the Hindu school of Indian philosophy: *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*. Along with Vedānta, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā is one of the two schools of Indian philosophy that is explicitly based on the Vedas. It is sometimes claimed that there are six schools of Indian philosophy (including Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Yoga and Sāṅkhya along with Pūrva Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta) and moreover that the commonality of these schools is that they accept the validity of the Vedas. However, this view is myth. Sāṅkhya and Yoga, for instance, does not explicitly refer to the Vedas. The schools certainly do not reject the Vedas—explicitly—but they do not recommend taking the content of these texts seriously. Vedānta in contrast is a philosophy articulated on the basis of the classic summary of the latter part of the Vedas: the Brahma Sūtra (*Vedānta Sūtra*) of Bādarāyaṇa. The guiding theme of this sutra is the topic of Brahman (the Great, Development) and *Ātmā*. Similarly, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, is based on a classic commentary on the former part of the Vedas: the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* of Jaimini. The guiding theme of this sutra is action (karma)—not in the extended sense of consequences of actions (though this too is relevant) but in terms of the more basic question of appropriate behaviour.

The *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* is of special interest to those concerned with ethics, as it claims to be an explication of *dharma* or ethics. Problems in understanding the ethics of Mīmāṃsā can be avoided if we keep in view the basic matter of ethics: resolving the question of the priority of the right (procedure) and the good (outcome). This question leads to at least four possible answers:

- (i) Deontology: the right is justified independently from the good.
- (ii) Consequentialism: the good justifies the right (the end justifies the means).
- (iii) Virtue Theory: the good *causes* the right, such that any consequence of the good is also the right.

(iv) Bhakti Theory: the right *causes* the good, as the good is nothing but the practical realization of the regulative ideal of the good. We can call this 'bhakti' or 'devotion' theory because a devotion to a specific ideal yields the good.

Curiously, while the actions that Pūrva Mīmāṃsā votaries recommend, and which are enjoined in the tradition based on the Vedas, make reference to various Gods, a standard view in this school is that taking the ethics of the Vedic tradition seriously does not entail a realism about gods. In fact, talk of gods can be deflated of their metaphysical content and understood solely as a matter of procedure (Bilimoria 1989, 1990). The classical Pūrva Mīmāṃsā authors are hence atheists. This is surprising, for Pūrva Mīmāṃsā is often depicted as the most orthodox of Hindu schools. But, philosophically, this is in keeping with Mīmāṃsā rejecting a Bhakti account of ethics, in favour of the proceduralism of Deontology.

In the next section (2), we shall analyze and explain the elements of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Ethics. This sets the stage for (3) reviewing the central argument of the school. We shall see that more than one argument arises, and the total position is one of *Moral Non Naturalism*, albeit a Brahminical version. More importantly, it is a version of Moral Realism. We shall then proceed to (4) consider some objections, and (5) end with concluding remarks.

The texts that we shall rely upon in our investigation are Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* (MS), Śabara's commentary on this basic sutra (Śabara on MS), and Kumārila's commentary on Śabara's commentary called the *Ślokavārtika* (SV).

## 2 Explication

The *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* begins with four concepts:

- *codana-* = injunction; command
- *lakṣaṇa* = definition; characteristic; attribute; sign; mark; indicator
- *artha* = welfare, material prosperity, wealth, worldly success, value, goal
- *dharma* = morality/ethics

These are strung together in the introductory sutra I.i.2 that constitutes a mutual analysis of dharma and artha. Accordingly,

- Ethics is a command that as a matter of definition yields benefit.

More succinctly and abstractly, the right is defined as yielding the good.

This definition seems to be ambivalent. It is not a virtue ethics: it does not hold that the good brings about ethics. Does it support Deontology, Consequentialism or Bhakti?

One reason that this account of dharma does not count as a version of Bhakti is that it is not committed to the strong claim that the right *causes* the good (Bhakti). It is committed to a weaker claim that the right is *defined* by the good. Consider the analogy: school is defined as what yields knowledge. It does not follow that attending school will yield knowledge. School does not cause knowledge. It is defined by knowledge.

It is not obviously a version of Bhakti for another reason: Bhakti links a regulative ideal of the right with the outcome: the practice of the regulative idea is the good. We find this clearly defended in the *Yoga Sūtra* for instance, where *Patañjali* argues for the entire structure of yoga on the basis of conforming one's practice to the ideal of *Īśvara*—the Lord. The Lord is a special kind of person (*puruṣa-viśeṣa*) who is untouched by past choices (*karma*) and afflictions (*kleśa*) (*Yoga Sūtra* I.24). When the right is what conforms to the Lord, we bring about our own Lordliness, self-governance and freedom.

One might be inclined to reject the suggestion that the *Mīmāṃsā* account of *ethics* is deontological because deontologists reject the connection between the right and the good. But this is a mistaken impression. Deontologists reject the idea that the right can be justified by the good. They do not reject that the right can be defined by its propensity to bring about the good. Indeed, most Deontologists, whether Kant, or Krishna when commenting on Karma Yoga in the *Gītā*, affirm that dharma is the kind of thing that as a matter of definition brings about good outcomes. Deontologists however reject the proposition that the good can be used as a justification for duty. The reason? For while it might be true that in general, duty brings about the good, it does not follow that in every case of the performance of duty, that good results. It may be generally advisable to tell the truth because good things happen when you do. But it does not follow that in every case that we tell the truth, good things happen. If we have a duty toward honesty, then it would seem we should not lie, even when lying would result in a good outcome.

So the definition of *ethics* from the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* is consistent with Deontology. *Ethics* being defined as what brings about benefit is not the same as the claim that benefit or the good *justifies* the right—the latter claim is Consequentialism. As this latter claim seems absent from the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*, we can exclude Consequentialism. But there is ample evidence that Consequentialism is not only not the *Mīmāṃsā* ethics, but that it is the target of their ethics.

Consider the commentary on the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* by Śabara:

... Dharma, however, is something that is yet to come, and it does not exist at the time that it is to be known; while sense perception is the apprehending of an object that is actually present and not non-existent at the time (of cognition);—hence sense-perception cannot be the means (of knowing) dharma". (Śabara on MS I.i.4 p.8)

This passage depicts ethics as a concern for something that cannot be known in terms of outcomes. Ethics so depicted is not about the good but about the right. This is Deontology: our justification for the right has nothing to do with the good.

## 2.1 How to know *Ethics*

How do we ever come to know what *ethics* is? If experience cannot yield knowledge of *ethics*, then it must be something non-sensible. Our non-sensible means of knowledge is representational. When we comprehend representations, we do not experience their content: rather, the representation mediates our awareness of such content. The content of such representations may be true or false. Being systematic or critical about such representations is a way to get to knowledge via non-empirical means.

According to the Nyāya school, as represented by the Mīmāṃsā school, the meaning of words is non-eternal because (NS II.ii.13):

Word is a product (non-eternal) because it is seen to follow (after effort) ... because it does not persist ... because there is simultaneity (of the perception of the word) in diverse places ... because there are original forms and modifications ... [and because] there is an augmentation for the word (sound) due to the multiplicity of its producers (speakers). (MS I.i.6-11)

Here, the Nyāya view appears to be confusing the experienced character of a representation with its content. The content transcends the experience of the representation according to Śābara:

... the word is *manifested* (not *produced* ) by human effort; that is to say, if, before being pronounced, the word was not manifest, it becomes manifested by the effort (or pronouncing). Thus it is found that the fact of words being 'seen after effort' is equally compatible with both views.... The Word must be eternal;—why?—because its utterance is for the purpose of another.... If the word ceased to exist as soon as uttered then no one could speak of anything to others .... Whenever the word 'go' (cow) is uttered, there is a notion of all cows simultaneously. From this it follows that the word denotes the Class. And it is not possible to create the relation of the Word to a Class; because in creating the relation, the creator would have to lay down the relation by pointing to the Class; and without actually using the word 'go' (which he could not use before he has laid down its relation to its denotation) in what manner could he point to the distinct class denoted by the word 'go'.... (Śābara on MS I.i.12-19 pp.33-38)

In philosophy, the idea that categories or meaning is eternal or transcendent of their representations is often known as Realism about Universals, or Platonism, after Plato who apparently was the first to defend this theory. The famous Mīmāṃsā author Kumāṛila thinks that this Platonistic conception of language provides the model for understanding how the Vedas are independently valid:

Vedic assertions are not false—because in regard to their own signification, they are independent of the speaker—like the notions of the word and its denotation. Or, Ideas originating in the Vedas are true—because they arise from sentences that are eternal—like the signification of a sentence. (SV V.xi.1)

All words are independent of their speaker if the meaning of the words are Platonistic. So if Vedic assertions are not false because of their eternal meaning, then all assertions are like this. But this is not quite Kumāṛila's point. Kumāṛila is introducing a distinction between two differing kinds of word usage. The first is context bound and characterizes everyday language use. Here, what we refer to is transient, and this transience is a function of our contextual usage. But the meaning of Vedic injunctions in context transcend them: they are not about what we are doing at any time or what we are referring to in our present case, but real in all contexts. The reason is that their significance does not arise from our social interactions; that is why their meaning can be independent of the speaker. As such, they are true in the way that mathematical formula are true: as prescriptions on how to organize and evaluate life.

Does it follow from these assertions that only the Vedas are a source of knowledge of *ethics*? Here a distinction is drawn between the source of moral knowledge, and what we can consult for moral knowledge. All moral knowledge is based on *śruti*: context independent, eternal knowledge. But there can also be a memory or tradition based around this: *smṛti*. If our traditions do not conflict with *śruti*, we may follow them (MS I.iii.2), and in cases where the two conflict, *śruti* takes precedence (MS I.iii.3). We could call this theory of moral epistemology 'Vedic Foundationalism.' It is a view shared by the Orthodox Vedānta schools and the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā school.

## 2.2 Internal Criticism

According to the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*, unethical acts are those that are intended to produce harm against other human beings; they involve the 'inflicting of injury, and the inflicting of injury has been forbidden' (Śabara on MS I.i.2 p.7). To inflict injury is to fail to maximize benefit (*artha*). Thus, on Śabara's reading, *ethics* is identical with that which promotes the well-being of people in general. This is in keeping with MS I.i.2, which defines ethics as that which brings about benefit. He notes that the Vedas do mention some actions that are divisive and harmful, but these are not prescribed, merely referred to (Śabara on MS I.i.2 p.7).

What then of injury to beings such as animals, whose slaughter is prescribed by Vedic practice? Animal sacrifice is an ancient portion of Vedic ritual. If the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā apologist wants to defend the Vedic tradition, it would seem that they have to own up to such immoral actions. Yet, this is not the Mīmāṃsā position: 'He who would attribute sinfulness even to the enjoined ... on the ground of its being a "Slaughter", like any ordinary slaughter (outside a sacrifice), would be courting a contradiction of the Scriptures' (SV II.273-274). Kumāriḷa's response is that as the Vedas are our source of knowledge of dharma, we are not in a position to object to its prescriptions. '...[F]or the comprehension of Dharma and Adharma, there is no other means save the fact of their being enjoined and prohibited (respectively) [by the Vedas]' (SV II.242-43). According to Kumāriḷa, the Vedas do not assert 'any sinfulness ... in connection with such slaughter ... nor is such (sinful character) to be assumed (in the case of such slaughter) through other prohibitions ...' (SV II.261-62). He concludes from these observations that 'sinfulness belongs to only that slaughter which does not form part of a sacrifice' (SV II.265). In the case of slaughter not enjoined by scripture, 'the disgust that we feel is only based upon the prohibitive scriptural texts' (SV II.234).

In short, our moral sensibility is ultimately derived from the Vedas. So when we psychologically object to something, we do it by virtue of the influence of the Vedas. There is no independent means of moral knowledge.

### 2.3 Anti-Naturalism

We have noted that Śabara argues that knowledge of *ethics* cannot be reduced to knowledge of the good. The good consists of outcomes. Outcomes are what we experience, yet *ethics* is about the future. So in so far as we are interested in *ethics*, we are interested in what cannot be experienced: the future. Thus *ethics* must be understood procedurally. This is Deontology.

Kumāriḷa provides the following further argument for Deontology.

For the comprehension of Dharma and Adharma, there is no other means save the fact of their being enjoined and prohibited (respectively). Hence the introduction of an inferential argument in this connection is not proper. For those who declare Dharma to be due to helping others to happiness, and Adharma to be due to causing pain to others ... though with qualms of conscience, if he has intercourse with his preceptor's wife, he would be incurring a great Dharma, because thereby he would be conferring a great benefit of happiness to the woman.... And further, he who would ascertain (the character of) Adharma independently of Scriptural prohibitions, would land himself on 'Mutual Dependency'—in as much as he would be attributing sinfulness to pain, and pain again to sinfulness. (SV II.242-47)

There are two aspects to this argument. The first is what is called the *reductio ad absurdum*: the reduction to absurdity of the contrasting view to Deontology: Consequentialism. Consequentialists claim that ethical choice is justified by the outcome. If this is true, then beneficial outcomes should justify actions. Beneficial outcomes include pleasure and happiness. The idea that pleasure or happiness is the chief outcome for ethical choice is known as Utilitarianism. According to Kumārila, this view implies that we should undertake actions that break bonds of trust and loyalty, but this would be wrong, just as sleeping with your teacher's partner would be wrong. This shows that Consequentialism is wrong. If we have only two options—Deontology or Consequentialism—this reduction via disjunctive syllogism (p or q, not p therefore q) shows that Deontology is preferable.

The second aspect of this passage is the idea of 'mutual dependency.' This criticism claims that there is a circularity involved in identifying dharma, or the ethical, with a natural property such as happiness or pleasure. The problem is that both ideas end up informing the other. Why is this mutual dependency wrong?

Western moralists have wrestled with this question. G.E. Moore famously argued that naturalistic accounts of the good that defined goodness in terms of naturalistic properties such as happiness fail to provide a definitive explanation of why the thing so defined is good. This is his Open Question Argument. Indeed, on Moore's account, any definition that tries to reduce goodness to some set of properties will have the problem of not being able to explain why the thing so named is good (Moore 1903, 14-15). Moore's critics have argued that if the Open Question Argument is correct, no account of goodness could suffice. But here Kumārila seems to agree with Moore because the Vedas, as something Non Natural and eternal—explain goodness. Renaming 'happiness' as the 'good' or 'dharma' provides no explanation. But linking an action to the Vedas does. By analogy, it is like the difference between merely renaming some particle in reality 'the explanation,' and linking the particle to a theory or body of knowledge. The former approach is explanatorily bankrupt, but the latter has ideas and principles to offer as an explanation. Kumārila and Moore seem to agree that calling happiness 'ethical' is merely an act of renaming and not of explanation.

### 2.3.1 Who is entitled to practice *Ethics*?

A peculiar feature of the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā ethics is that very few people are entitled to or able to practice ethics on its account. To the question 'Who then is entitled?' the answer is 'Only one who is able to carry out the whole act' according to Śābara. And in his view, what counts as being able to carry out the whole act is being able to produce happiness from the action. Animals and anything else that cannot see an act of sacrifice to fruition are not entitled to practice ethics. Moreover, as they have not studied the Vedas, they lack knowledge of ethics. Deities too cannot practice ethics in so far as the duties of ethic include sacrifices to the Gods, and such Gods have no one to sacrifice to (Śābara on MS IV.i.5 pp.973-974)

Amongst humans, not all can sacrifice either. The *śūdra* or labour caste is not eligible, for its members are not thought to be qualified to study the Vedas (MS, IV.i.26). But even

among those who can study the Vedas, not all are allowed. According to Śabara, Sages, who are the head of Brahmanic lineages (*gotra*), are not eligible to perform sacrifices, for they themselves lack a lineage (Śabara on MS IV.i.5 p.973), a prerequisite for sacrificial performances. Yet, we find according to MS IV.i.8, women are as entitled to perform sacrifices as men. Commenting on this *sūtra*, Śabara writes: 'It is not true that man alone is entitled to perform sacrifices; in fact, Bādarāyaṇa [an authority in the tradition and named author of the Vedānta Sūtra] has held that "the whole genus" is entitled .... From all this it follows that women also should be regarded as entitled to perform sacrifices because the genus [of eligibility to perform sacrifices] is equally present in all' ( Śabara on MS IV.i.8 pp.977-978).

### 3 Main Argument

This argument goes from the analysis of *ethics*, to the Brahmanism that ties *ethics* to the Vedas. The analysis of *ethics* (the first premise) in and of itself is controversial. The second and third premises are linked: If one grants the second, then the third follows. Together the argument is valid. But is it sound? Those who disagree could take aim at the second premise.

The Mīmāṃsā defense of the second premise might look as follows (the second premise reappears here as Premise 4):

- Premise 1. The only way to know about ethics is from *śruti* (context independent truth).
- Premise 2. Tradition based on and consistent with *śruti* is permissible as it derives from *śruti*. (MS I.iii.2)
- Premise 3. The common theme of *śruti* is the good that comes of ethics.

Therefore Ethics is a command defined by its good yielding properties (MS I.i.2)

Premise 4 and 5 are linked: if 4 is true, 5 follows. The conclusion is the basic claim of the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*. To get to it, from 4 and 5, one requires premise 6 to fill the gap. If premise 6 is true, then the good yielding properties of *ethics* are prescribed by the Vedas.

What is the reason for believing premise 6? It is Vedic Non Naturalism. Natural accounts of moral terms are fraught with question begging circularity. They are mere re-namings of a natural property with a moral term, and provide no non-circular explanation. The Vedas in contrast constitute independent evidence about what yields goodness. As the naturalistic account is a failure, there is no independent means of discerning the good (*artha*) apart from *ethics* as prescribed in the Vedas.



## 4 Objections and Concerns regarding the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā

### 4.1 Methodological Objection

According to one objection, the tradition of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā scholarship is not ethics or moral philosophy. It is a semi-legalistic tradition focused on conflicts and variations in customary law as set out in *smṛti* texts such as the *dharmasāstras*, which claim to be based on the Vedas. These are largely high caste texts dealing with ritual purity and the maintenance of social inequality (cf. Kane 1990). All of this shows that the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā is unethical in two respects. First, it promotes values of inequality and discrimination based on birth, and it is patently cruel in the case of its contempt for animals as fodder for sacrifices. Second, ethics is a species of philosophy. The Mīmāṃsā semi-legal concern for customary law and policy is not philosophy.

This objection is based on overwhelming evidence: the bulk of writing attributed to the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā tradition. Indeed, even the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* that begins on a philosophical note quickly descends into minutia of the Vedic ritual, which is far removed from what most regard as ethical.

But the idea that Pūrva Mīmāṃsā is not ethics for it is not philosophical ignores its trenchant arguments. The idea that Mīmāṃsā cannot be ethics because its values are not ethical is to confuse in what way any theory in moral philosophy counts as a theory of ethics with a biased, substantive appraisal of such a theory. Any theory of ethics counts as ethics not because it is true, but merely because it is a position on the relative priority of the right and the good. It may be mistaken, but this does not prevent it from counting as a theory of ethics, any more than an incorrect theory of metaphysics may count as a theory of metaphysics.

More importantly, to decide that the Mīmāṃsā ethics is not an ethic because it contravenes our moral values is to beg the question about moral values—it is to assume our theory of ethics as the premise on the basis of which we draw conclusions about what can be ethics and what cannot: only our own values would end up being vindicated by such an approach.

### 4.2 Philosophical Objection

A philosophical problem with the Mīmāṃsā view is its easy conflation of Veda and *śruti*. These terms are used interchangeably. But they are not the same concept. The Vedas form an idealized corpus: a body of text. *Śruti* is the idea of timeless, context transcendent, truth of philosophical importance. The arguments for the primacy of *śruti* over *smṛti* may survive philosophical scrutiny. It does not follow that the Vedas really are *śruti*.

This leads us to question the criterion of *śruti*. Kumārila elaborates. On his account, *śruti*'s significance is not transient—context bound. *Śruti* hence can be distinguished from the transactions we have in contexts: these are tied to our interlocution. Any text, though, that is not a matter of interlocution (conversations that we have together within a

context), would thus be *śruti* on this account. On this account of *śruti*, I could make my own *śruti* up, and leave it in a printed form for all to find, or perhaps published anonymously on the internet. It is not easy to remove something once it is on the internet: it would seem to have a timeless life, independent of particular contexts of interpersonal interaction and transaction. If context transcendent truth is the basis of moral knowledge, and if all this consists in claims that are context independent, everyone would have to follow my *śruti*. This is absurd. Merely being context independent is not sufficient for *śruti*.

One failed response on the part of the Mīmāṃsā School is to claim that there is some kind of independent verification of the Vedas being *śruti*, which is not available to every context independent text. Yet, this is what is rejected by the Mīmāṃsā School, as it undermines the primacy of the Vedas.

Another failed response is that Veda is real *śruti* because it is traditional, but Moral Propaganda written today and published on the internet is not. Problem: The Mīmāṃsā view is that tradition gains its legitimacy from *śruti*, not the other way around. So the Vedas cannot be defended on the grounds of their being traditional. A Philosophical option open to the Mīmāṃsā is to hence disentangle the content of the Indian Vedas from the philosophical idea of *śruti* as context independent sentences and theory on philosophical matters. These are intuitive truths. The Mīmāṃsā authors would have grounds for maintaining that *ethics* rests on *śruti*. This would be a form of moral rationalism where the source of ethical knowledge is not experience, but rational intuition. Traditionalists might reject this approach, but the identification of *śruti* as the foundation of *smṛti* is a latent criticism of conservatism: tradition comes second and is not self-justifying.

## 5 Conclusion

The case of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā ethics is not unlike the metaphysics of the Vedānta tradition. It is true that the metaphysics of the Vedānta tradition is based in some way on the Upanishads. But it does not follow that the theory of metaphysics that we find Vedānta authors defend is merely a directive: see Upaniṣads. Rather the theories are typically backed up with arguments that aspire to be philosophical. Here too in the case of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, the ethics is not merely a pointer to the Vedas. It is the more radical thesis: defer to what is context transcendent to discern what produces the good and employ this in one's criticism and justification of tradition. Put this way, the Mīmāṃsā ethics is not conservative.

As we have seen, the bulk of the Mīmāṃsā tradition consists in the identification of the Veda with the category of *śruti* (timeless, context independent truth) and on this basis constitutes fodder for the articulation of a high caste world view. This yields a substantive outlook that is biased towards the culture and interest of high caste individuals. But if this identification of *śruti* with the Vedas is without merit, we might look back upon the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā for its strengths: an argument for moral non-

naturalism and moral realism. The basic themes of this system are summed up in the argument:

- Premise 1. Ethics is a command defined by its good yielding properties (MS I.i.2)
- Premise 1. The only way to know about ethics is from *śruti* (context independent truth).
- Premise 2. Tradition based on and consistent with *śruti* is permissible as it derives from *śruti*.
- Therefore Ethics, is about *śruti*.

This philosophical essence of the position is purged of the bias towards high caste issues, and something that people could get behind regardless of their social context. The big question of course is what counts as context independent truth. We seem to need to look beyond Pūrva Mīmāṃsā for a satisfactory answer to this question so that the tradition of some people (the Vedas) is not confused with timeless truth.