

LAWRENCE MCCREA

“Just Like Us, Just Like Now”: The Tactical Implications of the Mīmāṃsā Rejection of Yogic Perception

The practitioners of traditional Indian hermeneutics, or “Mīmāṃsā”, are often described as the most “orthodox” upholders of the Vedic tradition, but even a cursory survey of the central works of the Mīmāṃsā tradition is sufficient to reveal that their positions were often quite radical, placing them at odds with most or all rival philosophical systems, even those within the “Hindu” fold. They were by and large skeptical about, or outright deniers of, many of the stock elements of Hindu cosmology—for example, the existence of gods, the cyclical dissolution and reemergence of the cosmos, the possibility of liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Similarly, the Mīmāṃsā position on yogic perception is decidedly at odds with what we might describe as “mainstream opinion” among Sanskrit philosophers. In opposition to virtually all other schools of thought in pre-modern India, the Mīmāṃsakas totally reject the possibility of yogic or supernatural perception. The only other group of philosophers who made this absolute denial were the materialist Cārvākas (with whom the Mīmāṃsakas otherwise have very little in common). In this paper I want to briefly consider some of the principal arguments the Mīmāṃsakas raised against yogic perception, in the hope of shedding some light on what made this skeptical stance so appealing to them or, perhaps more to the point, what made the admission of supernormal perception, even on the part of upholders of the Vedic tradition, seem so threatening to them. I will focus primarily on the arguments of the seventh century Mīmāṃsaka Kumārilabhaṭṭa, as he proved to be the most articulate and influential critic of yogic perception.

In interpreting Kumāriḷa’s arguments against yogic perception and attempting to understand their motivation, it is crucial to attend to the context in which they are made. Kumāriḷa’s most important discussions of yogic perception are found in the Codanāsūtra and

Pratyakṣapariccheda sections of his *Ślokavārttika*.¹ The central question of the *Ślokavārttika*, and of the section of the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* on which it comments, is to demonstrate that it is only from scripture, specifically from the Vedas, that people can gain knowledge of *dharma* and *adharmā*—that is to say, of the beneficial or adverse karmic results that will follow from present actions, including but not limited to otherworldly results such as the obtainment of heaven or spiritual liberation. The primary purpose of raising the question of yogic perception in both of the passages mentioned above is to rule it out as a rival means of knowing *dharma*, leaving scripture as the only possible means of acquiring such knowledge.

Now, the Mīmāṃsakas are not of course alone in wishing to ground their beliefs about the nature of the soul or the afterlife in purportedly reliable scriptural texts. Most of the rival philosophical/religious traditions they confronted accepted one or another set of scriptures as a reliable guide to otherworldly matters. What sets the Mīmāṃsakas apart from nearly all of their rivals is their understanding of how it is that scriptures can contain reliable information on such matters. Rival accounts of scriptural validity—both those of extra-Vedic rivals such as the Buddhists and Jains, and of those who upheld the validity of the Vedas, such as the Naiyāyikas—take the reliability of their scriptures to derive from the knowledgeable ability of their authors. Intuitively enough, they take the position that scriptures should be understood to be reliable insofar as it can be determined that those who composed them knew whereof they spoke. The remembered and recorded words of “seers” such as the Buddha and the Jina are seen as valuable insofar as they give us access to truths which they could perceive, but we cannot. It is, above all, against such claims of personal authority in matters of *dharma* that the Mīmāṃsakas direct their fire. It is therefore not primarily the existence of yogic perception, but its *usefulness* as a means for validating scriptural claims, that they wish to deny. They do offer arguments against the very possibility that any person could have the sort of extraordinary perceptual powers claimed for the Buddha and the like; but, crucially, they argue further that even if this were possible—even if certain individuals really did have the power to perceive *dharma*, for instance—this would be of no help to

¹ For a brief overview of Kumāṛila’s position, see Bhatt 1962, pp. 160-163.

ordinary people—to people like ourselves who are not yogis—in gaining knowledge of *dharma* for themselves.

This concern to demonstrate the epistemic uselessness of yogic perception can be clearly seen in Kumārila’s seminal discussion in the Codanāsūtra section of the *Ślokavārttika*. The *codanāsūtra* itself (the second of the aphorisms of Jaimini, which form the basis of the Mīmāṃsā system) indicates that the commands of the Veda (*codanā*), which the Mīmāṃsakas take to be eternal and authorless, are the only means through which one can come to know *dharma*.² In the course of defending this claim, Kumārila’s predecessor Śābara remarks that the statements of human beings cannot be considered reliable when they concern matters “beyond the range of the senses” (*anindriyaviṣayam*), for such things, as he says, “could not be known by a person, except through a verbal statement”.³ Yet if this verbal statement is made by another person, this only pushes back the epistemological problem one more step: how could the speaker of this statement have any knowledge of supersensory matters to impart? “In matters of this sort,” says Śābara, “human statements have no authority, just like the statements of congenitally blind people regarding particular colors.”⁴ Śābara’s brief comments, without offering any detailed arguments to this effect, presuppose a general uniformity of sensory capacities among people: what is “beyond the range of the senses” for one person will be so for another (barring sensory impairments such as blindness). Yet this is precisely what the advocate of yogic perception denies. The yogi is presumed to have sensory capacities that exceed those of ordinary persons, such that his statements would have the capacity to impart to those ordinary persons information about supernatural matters which they could not acquire for themselves.

Obviously, if claims for this sort of extraordinary perception are allowed to stand, Śābara’s argument, and the central Mīmāṃsā claim it upholds, will collapse. Hence Kumārila, in commenting on and defending this passage of Śābara’s work, seeks to rule out the possibility that the statements of yogis could serve as a reliable source of

² See *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.2 (MD, Vol. 1, p. 13): *codanālakṣaṇo ‘rtho dharmah*.

³ *Śābarabhāṣya* ad 1.1.2 (MD, Vol. 1, p. 17): *aśakyam hi tat puruṣeṇa jñātum ṛte vacanāt*.

⁴ MD Vol.1, p. 18: *naivaṃjātīyakeṣv artheṣu puruṣavacanam prāmāṇyam upaiti, jāty-andhānām iva vacanaṃ rūpaviśeṣeṣu*.

knowledge for ordinary, non-yogically-endowed people such as us. Due to this focus on the *statements* of yogis and their putative validity, the issue he confronts is not so much an ontological question—Do yogis actually exist?—but an epistemological one—How, if at all, could one reliably determine whether the statements of any self-proclaimed yogi are reliable or not? The upholders of yogic perception, and of the authorial model of scriptural authority, need to argue that their yogis, and specifically the authors of their scriptures, have direct and privileged access to certain truths—about the nature of the universe, the soul or its absence, our fate after death, and so on—that are totally beyond the range of what ordinary people can know by their own devices. The value of scriptures lies precisely in their capacity to transmit to us the knowledge of those who *can* perceive what we cannot. But, one of the key strategies of Kumāṛila’s argument in the Codanāsūtra is to show that—even if we were to admit the existence of yogis—the privileged access to truth that is claimed for them, far from making their words a valuable source of knowledge for ordinary persons, actually renders them entirely useless to us. He attempts to show that the perceptually privileged status ascribed to yogis would create an unbridgeable epistemic divide between us and them, such that their own knowledge, however accurate it might be, would necessarily remain inaccessible to us. I will examine his arguments in more detail below, but briefly his position is that “it takes one to know one”—that there is simply no way one can satisfactorily evaluate the knowledge-claims of purported seers or yogis, unless one can confirm independently that they really do know truly what they claim to. Yet one cannot do this unless one has the same extraordinary perceptual capacities that they do. Hence, the statements of those who claim extraordinary perceptual powers can be held valid only insofar as they are redundant—we can only know them to be true when they tell us what we are able to find out for ourselves. So, even if it could be established that such extraordinary perceptual powers exist in some individuals, their epistemic value for ordinary people would be *nil*. One could never tell the difference between a genuine yogi and a fraud without being a yogi oneself.

Kumāṛila’s argument against the epistemic usefulness of yogic-perception claims is grounded in a pervasive skepticism regarding the reliability of human beings and their utterances, summed up in his bracingly cynical dictum that:

At all times, people are, for the most part, liars.

Just as there can be no confidence in them now, in the same way there is no confidence in statements of things past.⁵

We know—from abundant experience, alas—that people nowadays are often less than entirely truthful in what they say. And just as people are nowadays frequently seen to make unreliable statements, we may reasonably suppose that people in the past were similarly undependable. We have, then, strong *prima facie* reasons to doubt the veracity of human statements past or present. In ordinary situations, this presents only a minor practical problem; if one doubts the accuracy of statements people make about everyday matters, it is easy enough to confirm or disconfirm them through direct observation. Yet, in the case of statements made by the Buddha, the Jina, or others who claim to possess extraordinary perceptual powers (and, in fact, claim to be literally *omniscient*), we are asked to place our trust in claims we are absolutely incapable of verifying for ourselves. We are asked, moreover, to accept that those who made these claims gained their own knowledge through a kind of “perception” wholly unlike any perception we have ever experienced ourselves, or witnessed in others.

Here Kumāriḷa resorts to one of his most characteristic moves: what we might call an “inference from the ordinary.” He argues that, in the absence of strong counterevidence, we may legitimately infer that the perceptual capacities of other persons—past, present and future—are basically similar to our own. Since people, in our own experience, have no ability to perceive—for example—objects existing in the past or future, we can legitimately extrapolate from this experience and conclude that people in the past were similarly limited in their perceptual capacities.⁶ As he says:

People can apprehend objects of a certain sort by certain means of knowledge now. It was the same even in other times.

Even where a heightened ability [in some sense faculty] is seen, it occurs without overstepping the natural object [of that sense faculty], as, for example,

⁵ ŚV, Codanā 144: *sarvadā cāpi puruṣāḥ prāyeṇānṛtavādinaḥ | yathādyatve na visrambhas tathāttārthakīrtane ||*

⁶ For an argument that awareness of past or future objects must be excluded, by definition, from the scope of perception, see ŚV, Pratyakṣa 26-36, and (for a translation and explanation of the passage) Taber 2005, pp. 54-57.

when someone sees objects which are far away or very small. But one's hearing cannot apprehend color.

And one never sees, even in the smallest degree, a capacity to perceive a future object ...⁷

In our own experience, we observe that there are variations in people's perceptual capacities. Some people are better than others at seeing distant or minute objects, and, extrapolating from this experiential base, we could plausibly enough imagine people who can see farther or smaller objects than any we have known. But we could not plausibly imagine people who could "see" sounds or smells; it seems to be inextricably part of the nature of "seeing" that what we see are colors and shapes, nothing else. As Kumārila sees it, supposing, in contradiction our own present-day experience, that people such as the Buddha could "see" the future involves a similar category error. To suppose that anyone could perceive future objects would fly in the face of our own experience in the same way as supposing that one could hear colors.

This sort of argument—that, in general, things or people in the past may legitimately be inferred to be "like nowadays" (*adyavat, idānīm iva*) or "like people nowadays" (*adyatanavat*), and that people outside the range of our own experience may be inferred to be "like persons such as ourselves" (*asmadādivat*)—is pervasive in Kumārila's work, and underlies many of the key arguments of the *Ślokavārttika* (not only arguments against supernormal perception, but arguments in support of the eternality of Sanskrit, and of the Vedas, and against the occurrence of cosmic dissolution).⁸ It may seem a rather cheap argument—not much more than a reflexively conservative attitude—but it does appear to generate formally valid inferences, and is not without a certain basic plausibility. If we do not base our understanding of the nature of

⁷ ŚV, Codanā 113-115: *yajjātīyāiḥ pramāṇais tu yajjātīyārthadarśanam | bhaved idānīm lokasya tathā kālāntare 'py abhūt || yatrāpy atīśayo dṛṣṭaḥ sa svārthānati-laṅghanāt | dūrasūkṣmādidṛṣṭau syān na rūpe śrotavṛttitā || bhaviṣyati na dṛṣṭam ca pratyakṣasya manāg api | sāmārthyam...* || Similar statements from Kumārila's (lost) *Bṛhāṭṭikā* are quoted in Ratnakīrti's *Sarvajñasiddhi* (RNĀ, p. 8) and Śāntirakṣita's *Tattvasamgraha* (TS, vss. 3160-3163, 3170-3171).

⁸ See for example ŚV, Codanā 99, 117, 144, 151; ŚV.Pratyakṣa.35; ŚV, Nirālabhānāvāda.85, 127; ŚV, Saṃbandhākṣepaparihāra 67, 77, 97, 113, 116; ŚV, Ātmavāda.137; *Tantravārttika* ad 1.3.1 (MD, Vol. 2, pp. 71, 75).

perception on our own experience of it, then what, after all, are we to base it on?

The key question then is this: since neither we ourselves nor anyone in our own experience possesses the kind of perceptual capacities claimed for persons like the Buddha, what sort of evidence might there be that would lead us to lay aside the evidence of experience and accept these claims at face value? *Ex hypothesi*, we have no perceptual evidence that would support such claims. On the other hand, if one were to rely upon scripture itself to support the knowledge claims, problems of regress would arise. To conclude that a purported seer possesses extraordinary knowledge because he himself claims to do so in a text he himself has authored is plainly circular. But if one relies on a claim made in a text composed by another author, one simply presses the problem back one level: How can one know that this second author himself possesses the relevant knowledge to support his claim?⁹

It might seem that the most promising avenue to pursue in attempting to validate omniscience claims in the eyes of non-omniscient persons would be inference. If we see that a person such as the Buddha invariably speaks accurately about matters that are confirmable through perception or other ordinary means of knowledge, may we not infer that his statements about supersensory matters are similarly accurate? To this Kumārila responds as follows:

If, having seen that [an author] makes true statements in matters where a connection between the object and the sense organ is [possible] (i.e. in matters accessible to ordinary perception), one were to conclude that he also makes true statements about matters that must be taken on faith, because they are his statements [121]; then one will have demonstrated that the authority [of his

⁹ See ŚV, Codanā 117-118. Somewhat different problems would arise if one attempted to support the knowledge claims of a human scripture-author with claims made in a purportedly eternal scripture such as the Veda: an eternal text could not contain information about a historically limited author (as it would have to have existed before he did). Eternal texts, the Mīmāṃsakas argue, cannot refer to particular historical persons or events. Those passages in eternal texts which appear to refer to such persons and events must be understood as figuratively praising or otherwise referring to elements of the (eternally recurrent) Vedic sacrifice—what the Mīmāṃsakas call *arthavāda*. Hence, any apparent reference in a purportedly eternal text to the omniscience of a particular scripture-author would either have to be an *arthavāda* passage (and accordingly be interpreted figuratively), or, as a historical reference, would show that the text is not in fact eternal—see ŚV, Codanā 119-120.

statements] is dependent [on perceptual confirmation]. If they are authoritative in and of themselves, then what dependence would there be on sense-organs and the like? [122] Just as, in this case, the authority [of his statements] is due to being determined by sense-organs and the like, it would be the same even in matters which must be taken on faith. [Their] authority is not established independently. [123]¹⁰

The inference does not establish what it is intended to establish. If the only testably valid knowledge claims an author makes are those concerning matters accessible to ordinary means of knowledge such as sense perception, then this can establish the authority of the author's claims only in so far as they depend on these ordinary means of knowledge. It can in no way establish that this pattern of accuracy extends to supersensory matters as well.

Kumārila does not himself offer any example of the sort of testable knowledge claims which might be advanced as evidence for the accuracy of their speakers, but his commentators all mention the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness in this connection.¹¹ If the Buddha's claim that all things are momentary could be shown to be true on grounds other than his own assertion, would this not confirm his reliability? But Kumārila's argument is well-suited to get around this sort of example. If the momentariness of all things really were demonstrable on grounds other than the Buddha's assertion, then it would in fact be a truth accessible through ordinary means of knowledge, and hence could not serve as evidence for his accuracy in matters beyond the scope of these ordinary means of knowledge. The same would be true of any claim of a purported yogi which could be verified through ordinary means of knowledge.

In addition, Kumārila challenges the inferential argument for yogic reliability with the following counterinference:

Furthermore, when [human statements] concern objects beyond the range of the senses, they are false, because they are human statements. [In this

¹⁰ ŚV, Codanā 121-123 (=ŚV(U), pp. 75-76, ŚV(S), Vol. 1, p. 127): *yo 'pūndriyārtha-saṃbandhaviṣaye satyavāditām | dṛṣṭvā tadvacanatvena śraddheyārthe 'pi kalpayet || tenāpi pāratantryeṇa sādhitā syāt pramāṇatā | prāmāṇyaṃ cet svayaṃ tasya kāpekṣānyendriyādiṣu || yathāivātrendriyādibhyaḥ paricchedāt pramāṇatā | śraddheye 'pi tathāiva syān na svātantryeṇa labhyate ||*

¹¹ See Umbeka, Sucaritamiśra, and Pārthasārathi ad ŚV, Codanā 121, ŚV(S), Vol. 1, p. 127, and ŚV, p. 83.

inference] each of the extra-Vedic schools will serve as an example (lit.: similar case, *sapakṣa*) for the others.¹²

Because there are multiple and conflicting claims about what exactly yogic perception reveals about the ultimate nature of things—the Jainas saying one thing, and the Buddhists another, for instance—each of these schools must argue that the others are wrong, and that their claims of supersensory knowledge are false. But this allows the Mīmāṃsaka to use each case as an example in constructing an inference to counter the other. The Buddhists must admit that the Jainas claim accuracy for their scriptures based on the demonstrable accuracy of the Jina's testable truth claims, and yet are wrong. And the Jainas must admit the same regarding the Buddhists. Thus each can be used to demonstrate to the other the insufficiency of the inference from accuracy about ordinary matters to accuracy about supersensory ones.

This line of argument suggests another basic problem with accepting the claims of yogic perception. The non-yogi attempting to judge for himself whether yogic claims should be taken seriously or not is confronted, not with one person's claim to accuracy in supersensory matters, but with a whole host of mutually conflicting claims—from Buddhists, Jainas, Sāṃkhyas, and others. Even if one were to admit yogic perception as a general possibility, how, lacking any means for judging among this welter of conflicting claims, could one hope to determine which claims one should believe? Once the door has been opened to claims of extraordinary perception, a free-for-all ensues. It seems that almost anyone can make any claim based on such privileged perceptual knowledge with more or less equal plausibility. Yet, because any number of these conflicting and untestable knowledge-claims can be (and are) made, no one such claim can convince. Kumāriḷa touches briefly on this issue in the Nirāḷambanavāda section of the *Ślokavārttika* (88-94). The (Buddhist-Idealist) opponent claims that all our awarenesses exist without any extra-mental object, like dream-awarenesses. Kumāriḷa, challenging the parallel between waking and

¹² ŚV, Codanā 126:

api cāḷaukikārthatve sati puṃvākyahetukam |

mīthyātvaṃ vedabāhyānāṃ syād anyonyaṃ sapakṣatā ||

The printed edition of ŚV reads *vedavākyānāṃ*, as does ŚV(S), but it's clear from his comments (ŚV(S), Vol. 1, p. 129) that Sucaritamīśra read *-bāhyānāṃ*; ŚV(U) prints the text correctly as *vedabāhyānāṃ* (p. 76).

dream awareness, notes that in the case of dreams we conclude that our awareness lacked an extramental object only after we wake up. Our experience of waking serves as a blocking awareness (*bādhikā buddhiḥ*) which invalidates the dream. But in the case of our waking awareness, there is no such blocking awareness, and therefore no reason to conclude that the objects that appear to us in waking life are unreal. The Buddhist counters that the awareness of yogis does indeed reveal the unreality of everyday objects, and therefore stands in contradiction to our waking awareness. But, Kumāriḥa retorts, “[the awareness] of our yogis [*yogināṃ cāsmadīyānām*] stands in contradiction to what *you* have said.”¹³ Kumāriḥa’s reference to “our yogis” seems rather tongue in cheek. Since the Mīmāṃsakas themselves absolutely deny yogic perception, the “us” in question must demarcate some broader affiliation of “āstikas” or “followers of the Vedas” (what we would now call Hindus). The point, of course, is not to claim that “our” yogis are better and more trustworthy than those of the Buddhists, but to show that anyone can play the “yogi”-card in any debate, and that such claims are consequently useless in settling philosophical disputes.

Along the same lines, and still more facetiously, Kumāriḥa mocks the opponent’s inference for the reliability of yogic perception (in the Codanāsūtra section) as follows:

[I say:] “The Buddha and other such people are not omniscient.” This statement of mine is true, because it is my statement, just as [when I say], “Fire is hot and bright.”

And one can perceive that I have made this statement; you have to prove that [those statements] were made by the that person [i.e. the Buddha or whoever]. Therefore, mine is a sound inferential reason; yours is open to the suspicion that is not established [in the desired locus].¹⁴

If the ability to make true statements about ordinary things is all that is required to speak with authority on supersensory matters, then anyone can claim such authority—even Kumāriḥa himself. Again, the real point is not to reveal the untenability of the Buddhist claim in particular, or even the general impossibility of yogic perception, but to expose the indeterminacy and consequent irresolvability of arguments based on

¹³ ŚV, Nirālambana 94cd (=ŚV(S) 2.60): *yogināṃ cāsmadīyānām tvaduktapratīyoginī* ||

¹⁴ ŚV, Codanā 130-131: *buddhādīnām asārvajñyam iti satyaṃ vaco mama | maduktatvād yathavāgnir uṣṇo bhāsvara ity api | pratyakṣaṃ ca maduktatvaṃ tvayā sādhyā taduktatā | tena hetur madīyaḥ syāt saṃdīghāsiddhatā tava* ||

claims of privileged perception. Since there is simply no way to test such claims, or to sort out good ones from bad ones, there is nothing to prevent anyone from claiming the authority of yogic perception for any conclusion he wishes to advance.

All claims to privileged or supernormal perceptual knowledge are suspect precisely because of their privileged status. Statements based on such knowledge, if they are to be at all useful, must be transmitted at some point from persons who have this privileged perceptual knowledge to those who do not. Yet the recipients of this knowledge, because they have no access to the perceptual awareness from which it is derived, are in no position to evaluate its accuracy. Thus the “revelatory moment”, when the yogi or the omniscient person imparts his knowledge to those who lack his perceptual ability, is doomed to fail epistemically. To quote Kumārila again: How could people at that time who wish to know whether that person is omniscient understand this, if they have no awareness of his knowledge and its objects?

And you would need to postulate many omniscient persons—anyone who is not himself omniscient cannot know an omniscient person.

And, if a person does not know him to be omniscient, then his statements would have no authority for that person, since he would not know their source, just as with the statements of any other person.¹⁵

Even actual omniscience is not sufficient to make one’s statements trustworthy from the perspective of ordinary people. One’s omniscience could underwrite the authority of one’s statements only if it were known to one’s hearers that one is omniscient. But they cannot truly know this unless they already know what you know—unless they too are omniscient. It takes one to know one. Hence, even the utterances of a genuinely omniscient person would be, for epistemic purposes, absolutely worthless. One could be confident of their accuracy only if one already had independent knowledge of the information they convey.

To adopt any less rigorous standard than this in judging the validity of a person’s statements regarding supersensory matters is to leave oneself no defense against charlatans or delusional people

¹⁵ ŚV, Codanā 135-136: *kalpanīyāś ca sarvajñā bhaveyur bahavas tava | ya eva syād asarvajñāḥ sa sarvajñam na budhyate || sarvajño ‘navabuddhaś ca yenaiva syān na tam prati | tadvākyānām pramāṇatvaṃ mūlājñāne ‘nyavākyavat ||*

claiming knowledge they do not possess, and opens one up to a multitude of irresolvable and contradictory claims, as discussed above. Kumāriḷa’s hermeneutic of suspicion is absolute and uncompromising. Even God himself (were such a being to exist) could not be seen as a reliable informant in supersensory matters. In the Sambandhākṣepaparihāra section of the *Ślokavārttika*, Kumāriḷa, having already set forth arguments against the existence of a creator God, goes on to show that, even if He did exist, no one could ever trust His claim that he created the world. As he says:

He could not be known by anybody, at any time.

Even if he were perceived with his own form, the fact of his being the Creator would not be known. How could even the first beings in creation know this?

They would not know how they were born here, or what the prior state of the world was, or that Prajāpati is the creator.

Nor could they have certain knowledge of this due to His own statement; for, even if he hadn’t created the world, He might say it, in order to promulgate His own lordship.¹⁶

So no person, human or even divine, could be taken as a reliable informant on matters beyond the scope of ordinary means of knowledge. You can’t be too careful.

Yet, despite their thoroughgoing suspicion regarding the reliability of any person’s utterances, the Mīmāṃsakas are not skeptics. They believe in a soul, they believe in an afterlife, and they believe it is possible for us to acquire reliable knowledge about such things. But how, in the light of the preceding arguments, can they believe anything of the kind? Famously (or infamously) they do so by pushing aside the issue of personal authority altogether, by arguing that their own scriptures are not they product of any authors at all—human or divine, yogically perceptive or otherwise—but are instead eternal and uncreated texts, passed down orally from teacher to student in a beginningless and unbroken chain of transmission. As we have seen from Kumāriḷa’s arguments above, it is the “moment of revelation”, when the knowing author transmits his knowledge verbally to his perceptually limited

¹⁶ ŚV, Sambandhākṣepaparihāra 57cd-60: *na ca kaiścid asau jñātuṃ kadācid api śakyate || svarūpeṇopalabdhe ‘pi sraṣṭṛtvaṃ nāvagamyate | sṣṭyādyāḥ prāṇino ye ca budhyantām kiṃ nu te tadā || kuto vāyam ihotpānā iti tāvan na jānate | prāgavasthāṃ ca jagataḥ sraṣṭṛtvaṃ ca prajāpateḥ || na ca tadvacanenaīṣāṃ pratipattiḥ suniścitā | aṣṣṭvāpi hy asau brūyād ātmāīsvaryaprakāśanāt ||*

hearers, that lies at the heart of the epistemic problem he finds with authored scriptures. But in the case of the Veda, at least for the Mīmāṃsakas, there *is* no moment of revelation. The text, and the knowledge it contains, are always already the property of many. And one need postulate no extraordinary perceptual or cognitive abilities on the part of the receivers and transmitters of the tradition in order to account for its epistemic effectiveness. As Kumāṛila explains:

Because it exists in many people, and because it is learned and remembered within a single lifetime, there is nothing to impair independent authority in the case of the Veda. And, if there were any alteration [of the Vedic text], it would be prevented by many people. Whereas if [the text] were revealed to one person, it would be no different from one created [by that person].

So, in this tradition, no one person is required.

Many people can be dependent [on it]; for they are all men, just like nowadays.¹⁷

Knowledge of the Veda is thus always embedded in a community. There is no time, and has never been any time, when its hearers were faced with the dilemma that confronted the Buddha's first audience: Faced with a person who claims to "see" the ultimate nature of reality, how is one to judge his trustworthiness, or the accuracy of his knowledge? Is one simply to accept his claims on faith? In the case of the Veda, there is not, and never has been any one person in whom one needs to place this kind of trust.

The key features of Kumāṛila's argument are thrown into relief if we compare them with his discussion of the authority of *smṛti* texts in his other major work, the *Tantravārttika* (TV), commenting on MS 1.3.1-2. These texts are held to be the work of human authors (such as the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, held to be the work of the human sage Manu), but are nevertheless held to be authoritative in matters of *dharma*, since they are thought to contain a restatement of matter derived from lost or otherwise inaccessible Vedic texts (which are therefore said to be "remembered" [*smṛta*], rather than "heard" [*śruta*]). The hypothetical opponent (*pūrvapakṣin*) who presents the case against the Mīmāṃsā position here employs arguments strikingly similar to

¹⁷ ŚV, Codanā 149-151: *anekapuruṣasthatvād ekatraiva ca janmani | grahaṇasmara-
nād vede na svātantryaṃ vihanyate || anyathākaraṇe cāsya bahubhiḥ syān nivāraṇam
| ekasya pratibhānam tu kṛtakān na viśiṣyate || ataś ca sampradāye ca naikaḥ puruṣa
iṣyate | bahavaḥ paratantrāḥ syuḥ sarve hy adyatvavan narāḥ ||*

those deployed by Kumārila himself in rejecting the authority of scriptures composed by self-proclaimed “omniscient persons” such as the Buddha or the Jina. We see the same invidious comparison with deceptive “present day persons” (“Even nowadays some people are seen to declaim things with no scriptural basis by passing them off as scripture”¹⁸), and the same problem of indeterminacy (“And, as in a legal proceeding in which the witness is dead, if one may postulate a lost Vedic recension as the basis [for claims made in *smṛti* texts], one can take as authoritative anything that one pleases”¹⁹), leading to the same difficulty that even the scriptural claims of rival traditions could be validated on the same basis (“If [*smṛti* texts] are supposed to be based on lost Vedic recensions, then, by this means, it would follow that all *smṛtis*—even those of Buddhists and the like—would be valid.”²⁰). The key distinction, for Kumārila, between the Mīmāṃsā defense of authored texts and that given by rival traditions such as Buddhism is that the Mīmāṃsakas claim for *smṛti*-authors such as Manu no special insight or sensory power beyond those observed in ordinary people nowadays—people “just like us”.²¹ As Manu's text is universally held to be valid among those who uphold the Vedic tradition, one may reasonably infer that the claims he makes are themselves grounded in that tradition, even if the specific Vedic texts which serve as the source of these claims are not presently accessible to us. There is nothing contrary to our experience in supposing that Manu learned the truths imparted in his work in the ordinary manner, by memorizing a Vedic text taught to him by an ordinary human teacher.²² The process by

¹⁸ *dṛśyante hy anāgamikān apy arthān āgamikatvādhyāropeṇa kecid adyatve 'py abhidadhānāḥ* (MD, Vol. 2, p. 71).

¹⁹ *mṛtasākṣikavyavahāravac ca pralīnaśākhāmūlatvakalpanāyām yasmai yad rocate sa tat pramāṇikuryāt* (MD, Vol. 2, p. 71).

²⁰ *yadi tu pralīnaśākhāmūlatā kalpyeta tataḥ sarvāsāṃ buddhādismṛtīnām api taddvāraṃ prāmāṇyam prasajyate* (MD, Vol. 2, p. 74).

²¹ Kumārila specifically rejects the suggestion that Manu had any “capacity contrary to those of the general class of all persons nowadays” (*idānūṃtanasarvapuruṣajāti-viparītasāmarthyā*) which would allow him to directly experience the truths contained in his work; “this has been rejected,” he says, “in the discussion of omniscience” (*etat sarvajñavāde nirākṛtam*)—seemingly referring back to his own discussion in the Codanāsūtra section of his *Śloka-vārttika* (MD, Vol. 2, p. 75).

²² As the scriptures of extra-Vedic traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism contradict, and indeed directly attack, the Vedas, and explicitly seek to ground their authority

which these Vedic texts may have been lost is likewise a part of our everyday experience: “For even nowadays one sees that texts are lost, while their meanings are remembered.”²³ Even when ascribing authority to texts of human authorship, the Mīmāṃsakas retain the basic principles of the textual epistemology developed above: that no faith can or should be put in statements which depend on claims of supernormal perception or insight, and that knowledge of otherworldly matters, in order to be reliable, must always already belong to a (beginningless) community of knowers—ordinary persons like ourselves—and can never be made to depend on such claims of epistemic privilege.

The Mīmāṃsakas’ attempt to ground the reliability of Vedic scriptures on their eternality, and on the absence of any person who either composed or revealed them, whatever one may make of its intrinsic philosophical merits, is a brilliant tactical move in the Mīmāṃsā polemic against their principle rivals, the Buddhists and the Jāinas. Because both traditions look back to historical founders, neither can claim, or would want to claim, authority for their scriptures on the only basis Kumārila’s argument allows for. It is an inescapable feature of both traditions that their emergence into our world (at least in the present time) is due to the teachings of their founders, and that the trustworthiness of their central claims rests on the personal authority of these founders’ own words. By calling the whole notion of personal authority into question, the Mīmāṃsaka is able to avoid the interminable and rather sterile “Our sages are better than your sages” sort of arguments that those (such as the Naiyāyikas) who defend the reliability of the Vedas by claiming omniscience for their authors, seem always to be drawn into. They capitalize on the one feature that plainly sets the Vedic tradition apart from that of the Buddhists or the Jāinas—its immemoriality.

ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bhatt 1962

Govardhan P. Bhatt, *The Epistemology of the Bhāṭṭa School of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*. Chowkhamba Sanskrit Studies XVII, Varanasi 1962.

on the supernormal perceptual capacities of their founders, they cannot be plausibly supposed to derive in this way from lost Vedic texts.

²³ *dṛśyate hy adyatve 'py arthasmarāṇaṃ garnthanāśāś ca* (MD, Vol. 2, p. 77).

- MD *Mīmāṃsādarśana*, ed. Vāsudeva Śāstrī Abhyaṅkar and Gaṇeśa-śāstrī Joṣī, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 97 [7 vols.], 2nd ed., Poona 1970-1977.
- RNĀ Ratnakīrti, *Ratnakīrtinibandhāvali*, ed. Anant Lal Thakur, Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series 3, Patna 1957.
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- TS Śāntarakṣita, *Tattvasaṃgraha*, ed. Embar Krishnamacharya, Gaekwad's Oriental Series 31 [2 vols.], Baroda 1926.