The "Frame" Status of Veda-Originated Knowledge in Mīmāṃsā[1]

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All theoretical enquires are defined by the implicit presence of their boundaries. An inquiry into the legitimacy of abortion, for instance, presupposes the existence of ethical thinking, free choice and so on. Starting at least from Descartes, many European thinkers have attempted to start their inquiries as if no background assumptions were needed. Others, in Europe as well as in India, have explicitly faced and acknowledged the problem of the boundaries of knowledge. Among them, Mīmāṃsā authors accepted a priori the authority of the Veda as the only source of knowledge about the deontic sphere. Thus we can compare the role of the Veda with that of any other a priori premise in European philosophy, such as Kant's categories, Hegel's threefold movement of the spirit, Malebranche's God, etc.

However, one might object that the epistemological status of the Veda is much more controversial than the status of its alleged counterparts: in fact, these European theoretical frames of reference have been created to justify our commonly experienced world and thus, in part, can be justified through it. If, for example, according to Kant's principles of understanding, mathematics is a science and astrology is not, then we might conclude that, since mathematics is actually scientific and astrology is actually non-scientific, Kant's principle of understanding must be correct.

Several centuries before Kant (and also long before the beginning of European Indology as a scholarly discipline), Kumārila replies to this type of reasoning, which appears to be in fact a paralogism, in his *Ślokavārttika*:

> Nor can the existence of an omniscient [author] be proved by the sacred texts; for in that case there would be mutual interdependence.[2]

2. ŚV *codanā* 118ab. This passage, together with Pārthasārathimiśra's commentary thereon, is very direct: *nāpy āgamagamyatvaṃ sarvajñasyety āha na cāgamena sarvajñaḥ, katham? ity āha tadīye 'nyonyasaṃśrayāt / siddhe hi sarvajñe tadīyasyāgamasya prāmāṇyam, tatprāmāṇye ca tatsiddhir iti.* 'He (Kumārila) says that it is also not possible to understand [that there is] an omniscient [author] through the sacred texts: Nor can the [existence of an] omniscient [author be proved] by the sacred

Here Kumārila is referring to those who base the reliability of the author of the sacred texts on the sacred texts themselves, with arguments such as: "He is surely omniscient because he uttered those true sentences. And those sentences are surely true because they have been uttered by an omniscient being". According to Kumārila, we cannot infer a frame's reliability from the reliability of cognitions that are originated through it. Thus, although we can use cognitions as an inductive element in favour of such a frame, our common experience cannot yield a final proof. That is, while our common experience can confirm the validity of a frame, i.e., its usefulness in helping us to understand our experiences, it cannot prove the frame's ultimate truth.[3]

The very possibility of verification is, by contrast, precluded in the case of the Veda, since – according to all Mīmāṃsakas – the Veda is a source of knowledge only for those spheres that cannot be investigated by sense perception and other instruments of knowledge that ultimately depend on sense-perceptual data (such as inference or analogy). In an imaginary society ruled by Mīmāṃsakas, a scientist could not (at least in principle) be accused of heresy for contradicting the Vedas since the Vedas let people know only what lies beyond human faculties.[4] In the Classical Indian milieu, Vedāntic schools discuss the relative strength between sacred texts and perception in connection with Upaniṣadic statements like "everything is Brahman", which contradict sense perception. Nothing like that would be conceivable in Mīmāṃsā texts, since perception (and those means of knowledge that ultimately depend on it) and sacred texts have altogether different realms of application. When the Veda says something apparently opposed to common experience (*Ṛgveda* 4.58.3, e.g., mentions a being with four horns, three feet, two heads and seven hands) this is not understood as referring to the domain of sense-perception. It is rather interpreted as supplementing a prescription, such as explaining the role of a ritual element within a sacrifice. Not all aspects of a sacrifice are perceivable through the senses, and as mentioned above, the Veda is an instru-

texts. Why? To that [Kumārila] says for in that case there would be mutual inter-dependence. In fact, once it is established that there is an omniscient, then a sacred text by him would be valid, and once this (sacred text) is valid, the [omniscient author] is established' (For editorial reasons, the passages from the root text by Kumārila could not be put in bold, they are therefore underlined).

3. For the time being I shall use this term, utilizing the common understanding of it, but for a short introduction to the huge problem of "truth", especially to the distinction between truth as consistency and truth as correspondence, see Kirkham 1995.

4. Moreover, according to the Prābhākara school, only prescriptions bear a meaning within the Veda. A "fundamentalist" reading of the Veda is also banned by Mīmāṃsakas (at least in principle), since words convey a meaning only within a context: 'Indeed a separate word is not an instrument of knowledge at all. This means that separate word-meanings cannot be objects of knowledge' (*pṛthagbhūtaṃ padaṃ nāma na kiñcana pramāṇam asti. pṛthagbhūtāś ca padārthā na prameyāḥ ity arthaḥ*, beginning of VM, chapter I).

ment of knowledge only regarding those aspects lying beyond sense-perception, like *dharma*. From a linguistic point of view, descriptive statements found in the Veda are only ancillary to prescriptive ones. In the words of the post-13ᵗʰ century Prābhākara Mīmāṃsaka Rāmānujācārya (see Freschi 2012):

> Therefore: "The Brahman is truth, knowledge and endless; the Brahman is knowledge and bliss. Through that spirit, all this is full. The one who knows everything is omniscient. Two Brahmans must be known, the superior and the inferior. Two beautiful birds, comrades and friends, jointly inhabit the same tree". It must be explained that these sentences, aiming [at first sight] at the established (*siddha*) Brahman and at the established supreme soul, [actually] aim at what must be done (*kārya*). [They can be so interpreted] by resting on a single sentence together with a prescription like "the soul (*ātman*) must be seen, must be heard, must be considered, must be meditated upon", because of the rule according to which "what is, is for the purpose of what has to be". This means: because of the rule according to which what is established must be supplied to something to be established (*sādhya*). (TR III, 41)

Some Vedānta theistic schools inherited the Mīmāṃsa way of argumentation, thus excluding sense perception as an instrument of knowledge with regard to other-worldly matters, such as God. However, they usually dismiss sense perception as an instrument for knowing other-worldly matters because human beings are fallible,[5] not because sense-perception is confined to altogether different groups of items. This is something they discuss at length.[6]

1. *The Scope of Cognitions Based on the Veda According to Mīmāṃsā*

According to Mīmāṃsā, what is perceived through sense perception cannot be rejected by Vedic prescriptions, since their sphere of application is entirely different, as stated above. The same holds true for inference and other means of knowledge (these can only be rejected if they go against sense perception).[7] Cognitions originating from the Veda can neither validate nor disprove our empirical knowledge. They are nevertheless extremely important, since they provide the background for human activities and wishes. A prescription such as "the one who desires heaven should sacrifice" cannot be contradicted from an empirical point of view since

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5. See, for instance, Jīva Gosvāmin's *Tattvasandarbha*, v. 9.

6. See, for instance, Yāmunācārya's *Saṃvitsiddhi*, and, within Advaita Vedānta, Maṇḍanamiśra's demonstration of how the Veda overrules sense perception.

7. For a clear description of this theory, see Kataoka 2003.

it refers to entities that lie beyond sense perception and the other instruments of knowledge (that ultimately depend on sense-perceptual data). Nevertheless, the prescription yields the impulse for sacrificing.

Is this distinction between fields of knowledge due to the nature of the various kinds of knowable objects? Or is it only an expedient by Mīmāṃsā authors to make sense of the epistemic validity of Veda-originated cognitions? As a matter of fact, the foundational role of linguistic communication in the deontic realm appears unavoidable, since it is hard to imagine any other foundation for it. Even a strenuous opponent of linguistic communication as a separate source of knowledge such as J. N. Mohanty agrees on the unavoidability of linguistic communication when it comes to the realm of what ought to be done:

> *śabda* alone gives us knowledge of moral rules, of what one ought to or ought not to do, of *vidhi* and *niṣedha*. I am not only saying that ought-sentences cannot be derived from is-sentences (so that perception and inferences are incapable of yielding knowledge of moral rules), but much more. I am not saying that 'one ought to do ø', follows from 'S (who is a competent speaker) says that one ought to do ø'; for to say that would be to say that moral rules are inferred from the fact that someone has uttered sentences stating those rules. What I am saying, rather, is that we learn the rules only from hearing (or reading) verbal or written instructions. There is no other means of knowing them.[8]

In other words, it is not simply by chance that one learns what one ought to do through what Mohanty calls an "ought-sentence" (i.e., a prescription). Prescriptions are, rather, the only possible source for knowing what one ought to do. Thus, even thinkers sharing Mohanty's doubts agree with the Mīmāṃsā assumption that only a linguistic communication can make one aware of what ought to be done.[9]

2. *Are Knowledge of States of Affairs and Knowledge of What Ought to Be Done Two Different Epistemic Acts?*

But does this also mean that knowing states of affairs and knowing what ought to be done are two different epistemic acts? Mīmāṃsā authors do not elaborate on

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8. Mohanty 1992, 256-257.

9. Another possible foundation of ethical and deontic laws would be contractarianism, according to which these derive from an initial agreement of people who decided that it would be beneficial for them to behave accordingly. This option is not discussed in classical India, but one might imagine that Mīmāṃsā authors would react in a way similar to Jean Hampton (1986) and endorse her scepticism regarding the possibility of such an initial agreement.

this topic. However the distinction between epistemic acts has been used by other authors in a similar context. For instance, Aurelius Augustinus acknowledged that there is a clear distinction between different epistemic attitudes (such as one's attitude toward matters of faith and actual states of affairs). This 4th-5th century theologian maintained that through scriptures one can only come to believe (*credere*) and not to know (*scire*). Although it might be correct to believe in many things one neither understands (*intelligere*) nor knows, these two epistemic attitudes (*credere* and *scire*) should not be confused. After having stated that linguistic communication is generally valid only insofar as it refers to matters already known through sense perception, he mentions the specific case of biblical sentences. These cannot lead one to know something, although they make one believe it:

> I acknowledge that I believe rather than know about [the stories of Ananias or Azarias]. [...] That which I understand, I also believe; but not everything I believe, do I understand. However, everything which I understand I know; not everything which I believe do I know.[10]

In other words, for Augustinus, while the Bible can be a valid source for things he then believes, he does not know these things. This means that the Bible is not an authority due to it overruling other instruments of knowledge. Rather, it is the supreme authority regarding what is to be believed, not regarding what is known.

At first sight the Mīmāṃsā attitude is quite different, since no explicit difference between knowing and believing is postulated. However, "blind belief" is ridiculed, something which makes one wonder about the difference between correct belief and blind belief that warrants such sarcasm. Could this difference correspond to the one between knowing and believing in Augustinus? Could it provide a solid grounding for the distinction between cognitions originating from sense-perception and those originating from the Veda?

Mīmāṃsakas criticise all beliefs that are based on unjustified assumptions and oppose common experience. In other words, Mīmāṃsakas are empiricists and

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10. The whole passage is as follows: *Ananias vero, et Azarias et Misael tam mihi ignoti sunt quam illae sarabellae* [Dan. III, 94]; *nec ad eos cognoscendos haec me nomina quidquam adjuverunt aut adjuvare jam potuerunt. Haec autem omnia quae in illa leguntur historia, ita illo tempore facta esse, ut scripta sunt,* credere me potius quam scire fateor: *neque istam differentiam iidem ipsi quibus credimus nescierunt. Ait enim propheta, Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis* (Isai. VII, 9, sec. LXX): *quod non dixisset profecto, si nihil distare judicasset.* Quod ergo intelligo, id etiam credo: at non omne quod credo, etiam intelligo. Omne autem quod intelligo, scio: non omne quod credo, scio. *Nec ideo nescio quam sic utile credere etiam multa quae nescio [...] quare pleraque rerum cum scire non possim, quanta tamen utilitate credantur, scio.* (Augustinus, §XI. 37). The translated sentences have been emphasised. The translation of the last sentence is taken from Teubner (2012), which also offers an analysis of knowing and believing in Augustinus which is similar to my own.

rely on sense perception with regard to our commonly experienced world. For supra-empirical experiences, provided one avoids unjustified assumptions, relying on the commonly accepted authority of the Veda is not blind belief. It is, in contrast, the only way out of agnosticism and scepticism. The following table presents an overview of these various attitudes.

Author	Source	Epistemic Attitude
Augustinus	sacred texts	*credere* (knowledge of things beyond empirical verifiability)
Mīmāṃsā	sacred texts	knowledge of the ought (trans-empirical)
Augustinus	perception, etc.	*scire* (knowledge of states of affairs)
Mīmāṃsā	perception, etc.	knowledge of states of affairs

3. *The Nature of Veda-Originated Beliefs: Possible, but Not Certainly True?*

One might object that while this justifies the possibility of the Veda's validity, it does not prove that its content is actually true. As a matter of fact, a Mīmāṃsaka would probably accept this objection. For a traditional Mīmāṃsaka, following the Veda was the only way to act correctly while avoiding both the paralysis of scepticism and the Buddhist blind belief in an allegedly omniscient Buddha.

A hypothetical contemporary Mīmāṃsaka born into a world in which the authority of the Veda is no longer traditionally accepted would have to agree with Immanuel Kant, who discussed the inference of God on the basis of duty, namely:

[d]as Zusammenstimmen mit der blossen Idee eines moralischen Gesetzgebers aller Menschen ist zwar mit dem moralischen Begriffe von Pflicht überhaupt identisch, und sofern wäre der Satz, der diese Zusammenstimmung gebietet, analytisch. Aber die Annehmung seines Daseins sagt mehr, als die blosse Möglichkeit eines solchen Gegenstandes.[11]

11. Kant 1794, X.

Thus, following Kant's argument, even if the theoretical background for the validity of Veda were entirely sound (and Mīmāṃsakas probably think it is), this would still not guarantee the empirical reality of the Veda's validity. Such a shift from possibility (e.g., of the historical existence of the biblical Ananias in the text passage by Augustinus quoted above) to actuality was justified by Augustinus by the truth (*veritas*) dwelling inside us, i.e., by Christ-God himself. Mīmāṃsakas cannot agree with such a claim; they would consider it an unwarranted assumption. However, a different possibility remains open to them, namely the refusal of the need to distinguish between justified belief and knowledge.

As a matter of fact, for Mīmāṃsakas, a non-defeated belief counts as knowledge as long as the opposite is not proven. This means that according to Mīmāṃsakas, for the Veda, the absence of defeating conditions is in itself equivalent to its truth. This, however, does not amount to its truth from the point of view of a theory which considers only justified true belief as knowledge. Thus, the Veda is valid as the frame-reference enabling the Mīmāṃsā system to work, but its truth cannot be established independently of it.

4. *Two Objections Against the Frame-Status of Vedic Cognitions*

Surprisingly this frame-status of the knowledge originating from the Veda was attacked from two opposite points of view. Some opposed it because they tried to establish or deny the authority of the Veda by examining Vedic statements on the basis of sense perception, etc. (thus opposing the view that the Veda is epistemically relevant only as far as otherwise unknowable entities are concerned). Others opposed it because they considered this frame to be completely empty, arguing that the Veda is meaningless (thus denying any epistemic role to it). The first group of opponents refused to limit the Veda's epistemic validity; the second refused to allow any epistemic validity to the Veda whatsoever. From the point of view of the history of ideas, the first group of opponents were primarily Naiyāyikas, who did not recognise a separate sphere of application for the Veda and, at the same time, deprived it of its exclusivity with regard to sacrifices and other imperceptible things. The validity of a Vedic statement may, Naiyāyikas maintain, be inferred and counter-checked through sense perception. In fact, the *Nyāyabhāṣya* argument for the validity of the Veda runs as follows:

(p) The Āyurveda, which deals with perceivable objects, is an instrument of knowledge; because it is the statement of a reliable speaker.

(q) The portion of the Veda which deals with perceivable objects is an instrument of knowledge; because it is the statement of a reliable speaker; like the Āyurveda.

(r) The portion of the Veda which deals with unperceivable objects is an instrument of knowledge; because it is the statement of a reliable speaker; like the portion of the Veda which deals with perceivable objects.[12]

Here (p), (q) and (r) are parts of a sort of hypothetical syllogism ("if p then q; if q then r; therefore, if p then r"). In this way, at least a portion of the Veda can be counter-checked through sense perception; it is through this that the validity of the whole Veda is established. Thus, in favour of the Veda's validity the great Naiyāyika thinker Jayanta Bhaṭṭa employs the case of his grandfather, who conquered a village after having performed the appropriate sacrifice.[13] For Jayanta, mixing different sources of knowledge (common experience and over-worldly experience) is not in any way a defect.

One of this first type of opponents is the *pūrvapakṣin*[14] quoted in Śabara's ŚBh ad 1.1.5, who contests the validity of sacrifices since their results do not appear at the end of ritual actions. He argues:

Whatever object of perception is not perceived does not really exist, such as the horn of a hare. And the sense faculties are able to perceive cattle, etc. But no cattle are perceived immediately after the sacrifice [performed by] one who desires [to acquire] cattle [through the sacrifice].
Thus, the sacrifice does not have cattle as result. And it is in the moment of the rite that a result should be produced, [as for example,] in the very moment of anointing [with unguents] the pleasure of the unguent [is felt]. If you were to say that it (the sacrifice) will give its result at another time, I will answer "no". We will not admit that the result of the sacrifice takes place at another time. Why? When the [sacrifice] was present, it did not give any result. When the result has come forth, it (the sacrifice) does not exist. If it does not exist, how can it yield [a result]? And we perceive directly another cause of the result (e.g., a gift or a legacy). And it is inadmissible to theorise about something invisible when there is a visible cause, because there is no instrument of knowledge (which could justify such theorising). We believe that also heaven, etc. are not the result of this Veda, whose faultiness we have seen.
Some utterances are also contradicted by actual evidence. After having prescribed the heaping of the vessels, it is said: "This sacrificer, with the sacrifice as his weapon,

12. Freschi–Graheli 2005, 303-304. This essay deals with the Naiyāyika approach to the Veda's validity vs. that of the Mīmāṃsaka.

13. NM, *vi āhṇika*.

14. The upholder of the *prima facie* view of a question, deemed to be defeated by a *siddhāntin* 'upholder of the definitive view', sometimes after one or more *uttarapakṣin*s 'upholders of other points of view' (different from those of both the *pūrvapakṣin* and the *siddhāntin*).

goes straight to heaven", [and so it is pointed at the physical visible reality, i.e., the body of the sacrificer].

But it (the body) does not go to heaven. The visible reality is the one which is burnt. It does not go [to heaven], as the prescription said. All utterances that contradict the means of knowledge are not instruments of knowledge, like "the gourd-fruits plunge in water, the rocks float". Because of their similarity with these, also Vedic injunctions (*codanā*) about *agnihotra* etc. cannot be relied upon.[15]

The implicit claim underlying this objector's assertions is that in order for the Veda to be accepted as an instrument of knowledge it should yield knowledge which is empirically verifiable through sense-perception, etc.

The standard example of the second sort of objection is found for the first time in Yāska's *Nirukta* [16] and is then repeated in the ŚBh.[17] According to Yāska's *pūrvapakṣin*, Kautsa, Vedic mantras uttered during sacrifices are only part of the sacrifice; their meaning in itself is not intended.[18] In this way, he does not deny their utility in the context of the sacrifice, but asserts that their meanings play no role in it. Thus, people like Kautsa appear to be orthodox Brahmans who believe sacrifice to have a sort of magical value: within the sacrifice, Vedic formulas must be uttered in a precise and accurate way, but their actual meaning is irrelevant.

The Mīmāṃsaka response removes all mystic allure from Vedic statements. Jaimini and Śabara declare that mantras are to be regarded as meaningful because they are instances of language. As described by John Taber:

This interest is the most revolutionary aspect of the Mīmāṃsā treatment of the mantra issue, for it represents an effort to demystify the Veda and convert it into a

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15. *yo hy upalambhanaviṣayo nopalabhyate, sa nāsti. yathā śaśasya viṣāṇam. upalambhakāni cendriyāṇi paśvādīnām. na ca paśukāmeṣṭyanantaraṃ paśava upalabhyante. ato neṣṭiḥ paśuphalā. karmakāle ca phalena bhavitavyam. yatkālaṃ hi mardanaṃ, tatkālaṃ mardanasukham. kālāntare phalaṃ dāsyatīti cen na; na kālāntare phalam iṣṭer ity avagacchāmaḥ. kutaḥ? yadā tāvad asau vidyamānāsīt tadā phalaṃ na dattavatī. yadā phalam utpadyate tadāsau nāsti. asatī kathaṃ dāsyati. pratyakṣaṃ ca phalakāraṇam anyad upalabhāmahe. na ca dṛṣṭe kāraṇe saty adṛṣṭaṃ kalpayituṃ śakyate. pramāṇābhāvāt. evaṃ dṛṣṭāpacārasya vedasya svargādy api phalaṃ na bhavatīti manyāmahe. dṛṣṭaviruddham api bhavati kiñcid vacanam. pātracayanaṃ vidhāyāha sa eṣa yajñāyudhī yajamāno 'ñjasā svargaṃ lokaṃ yātīti. pratyakṣaṃ hi tad dahyate. na caiva yātīti vidhiśabdaḥ. evaṃjātīyakaṃ pramāṇaviruddhaṃ vacanam apramāṇam. ambuni majjanty alābūni grāvāṇaḥ plavanta iti yathā. tatsāmānyād agnihotrādi codanāsv apy anāśvāsaḥ* (ŚBh ad MS 1.1.5).

16. The first Indian work on semantic analysis. Usually translated as 'Etymology', the *Nirukta* rather offers semantic approaches chiefly to Vedic words. Its goal being the understanding of the real essence of words, little role is played therein by historical and etymological criteria as understood in the European history of etymology.

17. ŚBh ad 1.2.31-52. On this subject, Halbfass 1991, 127 suggests also looking at Sāyaṇa, quoted in Oertel 1930, 15-26, 53-72.

18. On this interesting discussion, see Taber 1989, 146, 148.

source of truth. [...] In doing so, however, he [Śabara] takes a step away from the more ancient ritualistic attitude, [...] which views mantras uttered in ritual circumstances as having a sui generis efficacy, i.e., magical power (*brahman*).[19]

What Taber calls "truth" is, it is worth remembering, not the truth regarding states of affairs, but rather the truth of deontic prescriptions, as discussed above in sections 2 and 3.

5. *Conclusions*

To sum up, the Mīmāṃsā authors initiated an original means of justifying the Veda's validity: they sharply delimited the realms of Vedic and human knowledge. Since the latter has nothing to say about ethics and prescriptions, the Veda cannot be dispensed with. This argument is linked to the Mīmāṃsā focus on the Veda. Unlike other philosophical schools, the Mīmāṃsā does not try to base the Veda's exceptional status on the precincts of human experience. On the contrary, the Veda is considered the only source of knowledge regarding what must be done.

19. Taber 1989, 152. At the end of this passage, Taber adds a reference to Gonda 1960-1963, 32-33.

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