

## A Synopsis of PV(SV) 1.312–340

1. The validity of the Veda cannot be based on “authorlessness” (*apauruṣeyatva*).

1.1. If the Veda were authorless, we could never know what it means.

1.1.1. The Veda itself does not establish its meaning; nor, according to Mīmāṃsā principles, can some authoritative expositor do so.

Dharmakīrti begins his final assault on the Mīmāṃsā teaching of the authorlessness of the Veda with the statement, “Moreover, in holding such a view” – namely, that humans are unable to cognize supersensible things, which is the basis for the Mīmāṃsaka’s claiming that the mantras of the Veda, in particular, could not possibly have been composed by humans – “the Jaiminīyas compromise their own theory with their own assertion.”

If humans cannot cognize the supersensible, as Mīmāṃsā maintains, then how can one ascertain the meaning of the Veda? The Veda does not itself declare what it means. Humans must surmise what it means. (312) If you think some esteemed person – Jaimini himself, for instance – is able to ascertain its meaning, then you must accept that humans are capable of cognizing supersensible things. But why should only Jaimini be capable of this? In short, if you deny that humans are capable of cognizing the supersensible because they are afflicted by defects like desire, then you must deny that Jaimini is able to do so – in which case there is no way the meaning of the Veda can be known. If, on the other hand, you accept that Jaimini, at least, can know such things, then other humans ought to be able to know them as well. In that case, the question becomes why we should place our confidence in one person as knowing the meaning of the Veda rather than another. (313)

The Mīmāṃsaka at this point proposes that one should accept as an authority that person whose interpretations are supported by other *pramāṇas*. But, Dharmakīrti responds, it is hard to see how other *pramāṇas* could support his interpretations, since percep-

tion, etc., do not apprehend the supersensible. And if it were accessible to perception, one wouldn't need scripture to cognize it. If the Mīmāṃsaka were to hold that one cannot cognize the supersensible *solely* through other *pramāṇas* – the other *pramāṇas* are only effective, even in regard to their own objects, in dependence on scripture – that would entail the absurd consequence that one couldn't even infer fire from smoke unless it were supported by scripture. If, finally, the Mīmāṃsaka were to say that we have to rely on the other *pramāṇas* in determining *when scripture applies*, then one could once again ask why we need to resort to scripture at all when it comes to supersensible matters. (314)

If, moreover, the Mīmāṃsaka insists that only a Vedic statement explained by someone who is a reliable expositor, insofar as *other* statements of his are confirmed by other *pramāṇas*, is authoritative – or else, as the *Vṛtti* puts it, a Vedic statement that is consistent with other *pramāṇas* – then that should be the definition of scripture – “consistency with [other] *pramāṇas* (*pramāṇasaṃvāda*)” – not “authorlessness” (*apauruṣeyatva*). (315)

Dharmakīrti returns to the point that if Jaimini is able to ascertain the supersensible meaning of the Veda, then other humans, even though afflicted by various defects, ought to as well. The Mīmāṃsaka's acceptance of Jaimini as an authority means he believes humans are capable of cognizing supersensible things. Yet that is precisely what he denies! (316)

Or, again, if he insists that people, afflicted with moral defects, cannot cognize these things, then how is the meaning of the Veda known? The supposedly authoritative person who expounds it – this Jaimini – is incapable of knowing it on his own. Nor could he have learned it from someone else; for the same problem would arise for that other person. And of course the Veda does not declare its meaning itself. (317)

Thus, we really have no idea what statements like *agnihotraṃ juhuyāt svargakāmaḥ*, which is usually understood to mean “One who desires heaven should perform the Agnihotra,” really mean. For all we know, it could mean, “One should eat dog meat”! This is not the case for all traditions of practice. In the case of a human tradition, founded by an original Preceptor, such as the Buddhist tradition, the meanings of the statements one follows, i.e., the Pre-

ceptor's *intentions*, are transmitted along with them. And in the case of more rational traditions like Buddhism, Dharmakīrti maintains, the learned tend to following reason (*nyāya*) when determining what is to be done and avoided; they do not just rely on authoritative teachers. Here the Mīmāṃsaka is allowed to object: But don't you Buddhists also accept certain teachings from supposedly reliable persons, such as those concerning the arrangement of the world (i.e., cosmology)? Dharmakīrti responds, such statements are not to be considered *pramāṇas*; just because their authors have been shown reliable in some matters we are able to confirm does not mean they are reliable about everything they talk about. For practical purposes, when it comes to supersensible matters (in particular, matters of merit and demerit), one follows scripture because one has no other recourse. But, strictly speaking, scripture is not a *pramāṇa*. (318)

1.1.2. Common usage (*prasiddhi*) is not a means of establishing the meaning of the Veda, either.

Now the Mīmāṃsaka proposes: ordinary parlance (*lokavāda*) determines the meaning of the Veda. This may be an allusion to the principle declared in MīSū 1.3.30 that the words of the Veda and those of ordinary language have the same meanings; in any case, Mīmāṃsakas routinely cite *prasiddhi*, common usage, as a reason for interpreting Vedic passages in certain ways.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Dharmakīrti points out, even if we construe Vedic words as ordinary ones, they will still in many instances be polysemic – as indeed ordinary words often are. Who will be able to determine which of many possible meanings of a word in the Veda is the right one? The “ordinary” meaning, moreover, is established by convention, which is accessible to instruction, while the Veda is supposedly eternal. How could someone, in the case of words which supposedly have a beginningless, authorless relation with supersensible meanings, tell us what they mean? If one held that there is an explanation of the meaning of the Vedic word that is beginningless and authorless as well – that is to say, an exegetical tradition that extends forever back into the past – then the problem is just moved back a step.

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<sup>1</sup> See below, pp. 135–140.

How is the meaning of this beginningless explanation known? Moreover, how do we know the explanation has never been corrupted? We are aware of various factors that introduce errors into traditions – enmity, pride, and so forth. And why would the Mīmāṃsaka, of all people, put confidence in a supposedly unbroken tradition of explanation, since he is the one who emphasizes that humans afflicted with moral faults are not to be trusted?<sup>2</sup> That, in fact, is his most characteristic point, says Dharmakīrti. In his *Svavṛtti* to 3.319, Dharmakīrti goes further into how we hear of Vedic schools recovering after nearly dying out – even today some have only a few reciters – so that one might suspect that even those schools that have many adherents today could have been nearly extinct at one time but were restored, and that in the process of restoration errors could have crept into the recitation of the Veda in various ways. And the same could be the case for any “beginningless” tradition of Vedic interpretation. In summary, one cannot establish the meaning of the Veda either through an authorless explanation or ordinary linguistic practice. Even if the relation of word and meaning were eternal, ordinary parlance teaches us that words are polysemic, so that, in the case of Vedic words, only someone who knows supersensible things could know which meanings are the correct ones. And also according to ordinary parlance, the meanings of words are conventional; in themselves they are indifferent as to what they mean, it is only convention that assigns them certain meanings. Thus, a person capable of knowing supersensible things would again be required in order to tell us the supersensible things to which Vedic words are assigned. (319)

But even the Mīmāṃsaka, continues Dharmakīrti, does not really follow common usage when it comes to explaining the meaning of Vedic words. He offers as examples the words *svarga* and *urvaśī*. *svarga* commonly means “heaven,” but the Mīmāṃsaka construes it as “delight.”<sup>3</sup> *urvaśī*, meanwhile, is usually the name of a nymph who resides in heaven, but in general the Mīmāṃsaka does not interpret proper names in the Veda as referring to individuals – which would impugn the eternity of the Veda – but offers etymo-

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<sup>2</sup> Thus, Kumāṛila’s famous statement in *ŚV codanā* 144ab. See below, p. 125 n. 15.

<sup>3</sup> See ŚBh V.72,6–7 ad MīSū 4.3.15 and below, pp. 139–140 n. 78.

logical analyses of them instead.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, ritualists referred to the two kindling sticks that are rubbed together to start the fire in the Soma sacrifice as *Urvaśī* (the lower) and *Purūravas* (the upper one), who according to a widespread myth was her consort.<sup>5</sup> The *Mīmāṃsaka* cannot claim that one must sometimes resort to an uncommon meaning because the common one is blocked, i.e., it does not fit the context, for how could one ever know in the case of a Vedic statement, which refers to a supersensible state of affairs, that the common meaning is blocked? (320ab) And if we accept uncommon meanings in the case of such words as *svarga* and *urvaśī*, how do we know we shouldn't do so for *agnihotraṃ juhuyāt svargakāmaḥ* (i.e., "One should eat dog meat")? The meaning of this sentence cannot be resolved by other Vedic passages, because the meaning of those other passages are in doubt as well – for all we know, the occurrence of *agnihotraṃ juhuyāt svargakāmaḥ* there could also mean "One should eat dog meat." (320cd)

The *Mīmāṃsaka* has made it clear that he puts little faith in what humans say. Yet now he takes ordinary parlance as the criterion of the meaning of the Veda. He is being egregiously inconsistent. (321) Indeed, by calling common usage into question he disqualifies it as a *pramāṇa* that could in any way be applied in interpreting the Veda, i.e., when the common meaning is not blocked. The understanding of the Veda by means of common usage is "a haphazard grasping" which follows no rule at all. (322) Finally, it is common usage itself – which we know to be ambiguous so much of the time – which has raised doubts about the meaning of the Veda in the first place. (323) Therefore, if one were to resort to common usage, it is difficult to see how one could ever be certain of the meaning of the Veda. (324)

### 1.2. An authorless Veda could not have an inherent *meaning*.

Thus, a teacher like *Jaimini*, who presumes to tell us what the Veda means without really knowing it himself, is simply foisting upon his followers "his own conception" in the guise of the Veda, and is really no different from any other religious teacher (insofar as he is simply

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<sup>4</sup> See below, p. 126 n. 17.

<sup>5</sup> See below, pp. 49–50 n. 78.

inventing doctrines about what one must do in order to attain salvation, etc.). He is like the man who, when asked the way to Pāṭaliputra, says, “The post says it is this way,” instead of correctly saying (upon reading the post), “I say it is this way” – for *the post* cannot say anything! (325)

The idea that the Veda of itself is restricted to a certain meaning, a meaning which Jaimini is supposedly able to divine, is also certainly mistaken. Words in general are not restricted to meanings by nature; rather, they are suited to mean anything, for we use them arbitrarily to refer to whatever we want. (326ab) And if a word were by nature restricted to only one meaning, how could one ever know it in the case of a Vedic word, whose meaning is something supersensible? (326cd) In fact, however, a word is restricted to a certain meaning only by the intention of the one who employs it; the convention (*saṅketa*), by which the meaning of a word is learned, is the statement of this intention. If a word were authorless, as is supposedly the case for a Vedic word, then it would not be restricted to any particular meaning – it would be in effect meaningless; moreover, there being no convention expressing an author’s intention to convey its meaning, a particular meaning for it could never be learned. (327) If, to the contrary, a Vedic word were naturally restricted to a certain meaning, then it could not be used arbitrarily to mean whatever one wants, nor would one even require the statement of a convention to cognize what it means; for if its meaning were something sensible, its restriction to that would be evident to anyone. (If, on the other hand, it were something supersensible, no one would ever be able to cognize it.) Nor would a convention, which arbitrarily assigns a meaning according to the speaker’s intention, necessarily reveal just the natural meaning of a word. (328) When one has to do with conventions, one can no longer really speak of the restriction of a word to a certain meaning, natural or not. (329)

2. Nor can the validity of the Veda be based on an inference from the confirmation of a few of its statements.

Because of the futility of attempting to ground the authority of the Veda on its authorlessness, then – which Dharmakīrti has been considering since PVSV 1.224 – there are those who might resort to establishing its validity on the basis of an inference from the truth of

some of its statements which we are able to confirm. Just as those statements are true, so are all of its statements – even those which the Buddhists find most questionable – “because they are part of the same [Veda].” (330)

Dharmakīrti rejects this inference as a *śeṣavat* inference, a fallacious type of reasoning which he discusses in the opening section of PV(SV) 1, which treats the three types of valid reason (PV[SV] 1.11). It would be like concluding, from the fact that the few grains one has sampled are cooked, that all of the grains in a pot of rice are cooked. And although Dharmakīrti himself, following Dignāga, has proposed a similar account of scripture at PV(SV) 1.216, namely that the validity of its statements is inferred from the fact that they are made by a trustworthy person (*āpta*) whose other statements have been shown to be reliable, he stresses that such an inference can be made only if *all* of the statements of scripture that can be confirmed by other *pramāṇas* are correct; and even then, such an inference is made only out of necessity, because there is no other means of knowing what pertains to the achievement of a higher state of life and, eventually, salvation. (331) But to proclaim that the whole Veda is true because it contains a true statement here and there, while it makes so many other assertions that are patently false – that there is a soul, that some things are eternal, and so forth; in his *Vṛtti* Dharmakīrti meticulously characterizes a variety of fallacious Vedic teachings – such a person’s audacity exceeds that of the woman who brazenly denies committing adultery even when caught in the very act! (332–334) Indeed, if one considered a person an authority just because *one* of his statements turned out to be true, then there would be no one we would not consider an authority. (335)

### 3. Conclusion.

Returning finally to the question of non-perception, specifically, whether the silence of scripture, along with that of the other *pramāṇas* perception and inference, can establish the non-existence of something (PV[SV] 1.199), which precipitated his discussion of *āgama*, Dharmakīrti reiterates the point made at 1.213 that there is no invariable concomitance between sounds and the things signified by them – speech is not of the nature of the things signified by it, nor their effect. Thus, we can never be sure from an utterance of the exis-

tence of that which it is supposed to signify. (336) Should one object that words are in fact the *indirect* effects of what they signify insofar as they are uttered upon perceiving them, then the response would be that if that were the case, we would not find words having opposite meanings in different teachings, e.g., the word “sound,” which refers to something permanent in the writings of one school, but to something impermanent in the writings of others. (337) Thus, there must always be doubt about scripture, whose relation to what it means is never fixed. Those who rely on scripture in the conduct of their lives, putting into practice its teachings, cannot be said to be acting on the basis of true knowledge of anything. (338) Scripture cannot even reliably inform us as to what does *not* exist, i.e., insofar as it is silent about it. For even if everything falls within the scope of scripture, one cannot be certain that the reason scripture doesn’t mention something is because it doesn’t exist. (Here, Dharmakīrti’s argument is not explicit. It seems to be as follows: Given that scripture does not have a fixed relation to any meaning, we can no more be certain, from the fact that it does not mention something, that it does not exist, than we can be certain, from the fact that it does mention something, that it does.) (339ab) Thus, one cannot conclude, from the non-cognition of a thing by means of perception, inference, and scripture, that it does not exist. (339cd)

In sum, anyone who believes in the Veda and follows the Vedic-sanctioned practices of pious Brahmins – ablutions to remove sin, and so forth – is a pathetic creature completely devoid of discrimination. (340)