

*“Presence” as Exclusive: Kumāriḷa and Veṅkaṭanaṯha on Mīmāṃsāsūtra*

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Does an object need to be present in order to be perceived? Two classical South Asian philosophers, one theistic and another atheistic, employ this epistemic question to understand how one can know dharma (i.e., a ritual or moral code), a question that occupied many thinkers in the Sanskrit cosmopolis. In a comparative analysis, I examine how both Kumāriḷa (ca. 700) and Veṅkaṭanaṯha (ca.1269-ca.1370) argue that dharma is not perceptible owing to its not being a present object. This essay will consider how Kumāriḷa and Veṅkaṭanaṯha refute the possibility of perception as a means to know dharma through a focus on “presence.” These comparisons, exemplifying how arguments are recreated in South Asian philosophy, demonstrate how Veṅkaṭanaṯha presents himself as part of Kumāriḷa’s intellectual lineage while presenting distinct arguments.

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## I. Introduction

Many South Asian philosophers have grappled with the following question: how can one know *dharma*?<sup>1</sup> In the context of classical South Asian thought, *dharma* broadly refers to ritual and moral code. While some philosophers argue that sacred texts, like the Vedas, impart knowledge about *dharma*, others argue that special, enlightened people can directly perceive it, relying on whom we can gain knowledge about *dharma*. Kumāriila presents a strong argument against the notion that perception is a means to apprehend *dharma* in the *Śloka-vārttika*, a Sanskrit sub-commentary on Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*. Veṅkaṭanaṭha, situating himself within the Purvamīmāṃsā commentarial tradition and writing from the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta philosophical school, offers a similar argument with added nuance in his commentary on the same text titled *Seśvaramīmāṃsā*. This essay will consider how Kumāriila and Veṅkaṭanaṭha refute the possibility of perception as a means to know *dharma* through a focus on "presence." I examine how both Kumāriila and Veṅkaṭanaṭha argue that *dharma* is not perceptible owing to its not being a present object through a comparative analysis.

Kumāriila Bhaṭṭa (ca.700 CE), was a Mīmāṃsaka<sup>2</sup> who emphasizes the authority of the Vedas in a time when Buddhism was prominent in South Asia.<sup>3</sup> In the *Śloka-vārttika*, Kumāriila challenges Buddhist epistemologists who attempted to establish yogic perception as a valid means of cultivating knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Veṅkaṭanaṭha (ca.1269-ca.1370) later recreates Kumāriila's arguments that criticise yogic perception as a means of knowing *dharma*. This process of recreating arguments highlights a unique

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1 I am grateful to Elisa Freschi for her support and our conversations as I wrote this paper.

2 Mīmāṃsā is a classical school of thought in South Asia concerned with *dharma*, or proper ritual and moral action, and a Mīmāṃsaka is one who belongs to that school.

3 John Taber, *A Hindu Critique of Buddhist Epistemology: Kumarila on Perception: the 'Determination of Perception' Chapter of Kumarila Bhatta's Sloka-varttika - Translation and Commentary* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 10.

4 *Ibid.*, 8.

feature of Veṅkaṭanaṯha’s philosophy. He is an Uttaramīmāṃsā philosopher (as a Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedāntan) participating in the debates of the Purvamīmāṃsākas, whom he sees as his predecessors. Elisa Freschi sees “the emphasis on Pūrva Mīmāṃsā and Uttara Mīmāṃsā (or Vedānta) [being] a single system” as one of Veṅkaṭanaṯha’s major philosophical outlines.<sup>5</sup> Veṅkaṭanaṯha is a theistic philosopher who recreates many of the atheist Kumāriḷa’s arguments with increased nuance. This paper will explore how Veṅkaṭanaṯha uses Kumāriḷa’s rejection of perception as a means of knowing dharma—specifically, Kumāriḷa’s emphasis on an object of perception being present—to put forth theistic arguments that are informed by devotion to God. In doing so, I draw attention to how Veṅkaṭanaṯha adapts an atheistic tradition of Mīmāṃsā to insert his commitment to God.

Sanskrit philosophy is largely enacted through commentary. For instance, South Asian philosophers will perform exegesis on sūtras, which are esoteric “formula-like assertions,” or aphorisms.<sup>6</sup> These commentaries do not exist in a vacuum, but rather often engage with and respond to one another. In this process, they may defend their ideological systems against another by asserting their interpretation of the sūtra.<sup>7</sup> Thus, one sūtra can have a range of interpretations, as this exploration will demonstrate.

Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa situated himself within Purvamīmāṃsā, also known as Mīmāṃsā, which is a school of classical South Asian philosophy concerned with earlier ritual texts in the Vedas. Since the Purvamīmāṃsākas aimed to centralise the authority of the Vedas as the most authoritative epistemic means of knowing dharma, they needed to negate the utility of other instruments of knowledge, such as perce-

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5 Elisa Freschi, “Veṅkaṭanaṯha (Vedānta Deśika) (c. 1269—c. 1370),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015), 8.

6 Jonardon Ganeri, “Sanskrit Philosophical Commentary,” *Journal of the Indian Council Philosophical Research* 27 (2010): 187.

7 *Ibid.*, 191.

tion, in knowing dharma.<sup>8</sup> In this context, dharma refers to deontic injunctions relating primarily to ritual obligations. Further, the Mīmāṃsā worldview did not necessitate an omnipotent God, although later Mīmāṃsā traditions in the eleventh century depart from this view.<sup>9</sup>

Vedānta, also known as Uttaramīmāṃsā, is school of South Asian philosophy that follows as an exegesis of the latter half of the Vedas, namely the Upaniṣads. In contrast to the Purvamīmāṃsā tradition, Vedānta traditions are largely theistic. Veṅkaṭanātha is of the Viśiṣṭādvaita school within Vedānta, wherein he follows the epistemic precedents of his Mīmāṃsā predecessors. Veṅkaṭanātha, like Kumārila, wishes to foreground the Vedas as the primary epistemic means to dharma, and in the process, must demonstrate how perception falls short in apprehending dharma. One strong argument in favour of perception as a means of knowing dharma is that of yogic perception, which Kumārila and Veṅkaṭanātha defeat in similar yet unique ways, which is explained more in sections three and four. It is important to note that I compare perspectives from a theistic and an atheistic commentator, highlighting how a commitment to God informs the epistemic claims.

## II. Mīmāṃsāsūtra 1.1.4: "Vidyamāna"

Veṅkaṭanātha attempts to refute intellectual intuition as a means of knowing dharma in *Seśvaramīmāṃsā*. Like Kumārila, he presents an argument against intellectual intuition within his commentary on *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.4. This sūtra states:

*satsamprayoge puruṣasyendriyaṇaṃ buddhijanma tatpratyakṣamanimittaṃ  
vidyamānopalambhanatvaṃ*

[When there is a connection (*samprayoge*) of a person's (*puruṣasya*) sense fac-

<sup>8</sup>Elisa Freschi. "Mīmāṃsā," *History of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Purushottama Bilimoria (Routledge, 2018), 151.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 155.

ulties (*indriyaṇam*) with an existing (*sat*) object, there is the arising of a cognition (*buddhijanma*)— that (*tat*) is perception (*pratyakṣam*). It is not a cause (*animittam*) [to know dharma], because perception apprehends (*upalambhan-atvam*) that which is present (*vidyamāna*).]

Veṅkaṭanaṭha begins his commentary on this verse by raising the question of whether dharma can be known through perception.<sup>10</sup> This question is a ground for debate between Buddhist epistemologists and Mīmāṃsakas. To validate the Buddha’s cognitions, Buddhists want to argue that perception—specifically, direct yogic perception wherein the intellect directly apprehends the object—is a means of knowing dharma.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, the Mīmāṃsakas want to decentralise perception as a means of knowing dharma and centralise *śabda* [linguistic communication].<sup>12</sup> At that time, the Mīmāṃsakas were unique in their opposition to yogic perception and thus needed to defend their position.<sup>13</sup> As it stands, the above verse seems to give a pointed definition of perception, highlighting the reason why it cannot be a means to know dharma. Even though ‘dharma’ is not overtly part of the verse, the surrounding context of the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* makes obvious that the topic in question is dharma, given that the inaugural *sūtra* states “*athāto dharmajijñāsā*,” [“Now begins the inquiry into dharma”].<sup>14</sup>

10 *Tadatra kiṃ pratyakṣam dharme pramāṇam sambhavati na veti iti vicaraḥ* [“Here, why can perception not be a valid way of knowing dharma? That is the question at hand.”] (SM 1.6 in Freschi 59)

Note that perception is different between the debating parties. Mīmāṃsakas discuss perception as sense perception, while Buddhists suggest direct perception is a way of knowing dharma.

11 Elisa Freschi, “Veṅkaṭanaṭha (Vedānta Deśika) (c. 1269—c. 1370),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015), 11.

12 Jan Westerhoff, “The School of Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti,” *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 250.

13 Lawrence McCrea, “‘Just Like Us, Just Like Now’: The Tactical Implications of the Mīmāṃsā Rejection of Yogic Perception,” *Yogic Perception, Meditation, and Altered States of Consciousness* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 55.

14 *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.1

### III. Perception Takes Only Present Objects

Veṅkaṭanaṭha answers this question of whether dharma can be known through sense perception when he comes to his final position, saying that "dharma is not sense perceptible on account of its not being present."<sup>15</sup> He denies the perceptibility of dharma by arguing that only present objects can be perceived, and because dharma is not present, it cannot be perceived. Kumāriḷa's approach of emphasising presence in Jaimini's sūtra seems to influence Veṅkaṭanaṭha's response, which is demonstrated through my analysis.

In Ślokavārttika 18, Kumāriḷa spells out the relationship between presence, dharma, and perception as he proposes his reading of Mīmāṃsāsūtra 1.1.4:

Since perception (*pratyakṣaṃ*), which is well known (*siddhaṃ*) to ordinary people (*jane*),<sup>16</sup> has such (*evaṃ*) a property (*dharmakatvataḥ*), it is the apprehension (*upalambhatvaṃ*) of that which is present (*vidyamāna*). Therefore, it is not a basis of knowledge of dharma<sup>17</sup>

Kumāriḷa highlights exactly what prevents perception from being a way to know dharma: "apprehension of... [the] present." In other words, perception entails cognizing only present objects. Kumāriḷa suggests that the object of one's sight must be physically present in front of them. In Sanskrit, this occurrence is called *pratyakṣa*, a term which refers to perception as an instrument of knowledge, and literally translates to "in front of one's eyes" (though perception may not be limited to sight).<sup>18</sup>

For example, Kumāriḷa might argue that in order to see the Washington Mon-

15 *dharmah na pratyakṣaḥ avidyamānatvāt* ["Because of its lack of being present, dharma [is not known through] perception"] (SM 1.6.2.1 in Freschi 61)

16 While "which is well known to people" might seem strange, it is actually a reference to how Kumāriḷa recast the order of the sūtra." See Taber 50-52.

17 *Pratyakṣaṃ yat jane siddhaṃ tasya evaṃ dharmakatvataḥ | vidyamānopalambhatvaṃ tena dharme nimittatā* (Ślokavārttika 18) (John Taber 2005, 51).

18 I interpret *pratyakṣa* as a synecdoche wherein eyes encompass other sense organs. Because eyes are arguably the primary sense organ, they can stand in for others.

ument, you would need to be present in Washington, D.C. One might object that you can see the monument by looking at a rendering on television. What is the difference between looking at the Washington Monument through a television and in person? In both cases, the person is perceiving some sense of the monument using their senses. Let us imagine that you are looking at an expensive television screen that is presenting an extremely high-definition image of the Washington Monument, as if there was a window in the screen's place. Based on the preceding example, one could plausibly suggest that you have perceived the monument in all the relevant ways. That is, so long as the depiction of the monument is accurate, it would seem that the object of your perception is not merely a digital rendering, but also in a salient sense, the monument itself. I would reply, however, that the object of your perception is the television, not the actual Washington Monument.<sup>19</sup>

Though Kumāriḷa could not respond directly to issues regarding television screens, he faced different arguments in the socio-religious contexts of the Sanskrit cosmopolis. Yogic perception—a particular type of perception favoured by Nyāya and Buddhist schools—allows one to apprehend objects that are too subtle to be grasped by the senses, according to its proponents.<sup>20</sup> In other words, yogic perception could allow you to see the Washington Monument from Toronto or the monument as it would appear in 2035.<sup>21</sup> Intellectual intuition, of which yogic perception is a type, involves accessing dharma through direct perception, such that the object is grasped immediately, unmediated by reasoning or sense faculties. The Nyāya school pushed for intellectual

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19 Kumāriḷa seems to not have accounted for content in his discussion of a "present object". What if the content of the perception is the same? Here, the content of the perception is the Washington Monument, even if the object is either the monument in person or a television that depicts it. While less relevant in the current discussion of yogic perception, the differentiation between content and object could have been useful. Philosopher Maṅḍanamiśra of the Advaita school handles a similar phenomenon, of the cow and a picture of a cow, in terms of truth (Ganeri 131).

20 Westerhoff, "The School of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti," 249.

21 Yogic perception is an elaborate epistemic argument, which I have only briefly described. See Westerhoff 2018.

intuition to validate the perception of yogis, while the Buddhists needed the validity of intellectual intuition to vindicate the Buddha's claim of apprehending dharma.<sup>22</sup> Because Kumāriḷa (and subsequently Veṅkaṭanaṭha) wanted to establish śabda—that is, linguistic communication with respect to the Veda—as the only way of knowing dharma, he first had to refute perception as affording the possibility of knowing dharma. With regard to the monument, Kumāriḷa would argue that you cannot perceive the Washington Monument of 2035 in 2022, nor can you see the Washington Monument from Toronto—that vision would be outside the bounds of perception, because perception apprehends only that which is present. You may be able to imagine it in the future, or you might look at an object that otherwise depicts it, but you cannot see the monument as it actually exists in those contexts.

#### IV. Yogipratyakṣa: Authoritative Perception

Kumāriḷa elaborates on why the sūtra needs to spell out perception in a following verse. He writes:

Having the nature of perception (*pratyakṣamado*) is the reason (*hetu*); the rest of the sūtra (*śeṣam*) is for establishing the reason (*hetuprasiddhaye*). Because this is well known (*prasiddhatvāt*) in regard to our (*asmat*) perception., it is stated (*abhidhīyate*) in regard to the yogin (*yogyartham*).<sup>23</sup>

Here, Kumāriḷa explains that because the preceding point about perception is obvious, the sūtra intentionally excludes yogic perception. In this statement, he assumes that yogic perception is a type of perception like our own, and therefore, not even yogic perception can be a means to know dharma.<sup>24</sup> Because he is not present-

22 Only certain people have access to the dharma through perception, says the opponent, as Veṅkaṭanaṭha lays out four arguments in favour of dharma being sense-perceptible in his *purvapakṣa*.

23 *Pratyakṣamado hetuḥ śeṣam hetuprasiddhaye | asmadada prasiddhatvādyogyarthamabhidhīyate* (Ślokaṁvārttika 21) (John Taber 2005, 52).

24 *Ibid.*, 52. To learn more about Kumāriḷa's rejection of yogic perception, see Taber 2005, 54-55.



ed with evidence to the contrary, Kumāriḷa assumes that everyone else's perception is just like his own.<sup>25</sup> If people presently do not have special perceptual powers, why would people of the past, like the Buddha, have extraordinary yogic perception?<sup>26</sup>

Instead of adopting Kumāriḷa's assumption that all people have equal perception, Veṅkaṭanaṯha considers whether special people like the Buddha can have special perception. In the voice of the objector, he writes:

[Dharma] is nonetheless easily grasped through the direct perception, assisted (*sahaḷṛta*) by a heap of *saṃskāras*, of those who are accustomed (*śīla*) to that, like the reality of a precious stone (*ratna*) [is easily grasped by experts, but not by common people].<sup>27</sup>

In other words, a jeweller can look at what others might consider to be an ordinary rock and recognize that it is a diamond in the rough. This is because someone with acute expertise is accustomed to seeing extraordinary things in seemingly ordinary situations. Similarly, an expert in dharmic matters can access dharma through direct perception. But in response to this possible opposition, Veṅkaṭanaṯha raises the point that even if the stone is perceived as a jewel in the rough, "the exact heaviness is not known by the eyes."<sup>28</sup> This is to say, not everything is completely accessible to even the most skilled experts, and there will always be something outside of their bounds of perception. Through this refutation, I infer that Veṅkaṭanaṯha considers dharma as the inaccessible object that is outside of the bounds of perception. Just as the eyes cannot weigh a stone, because ascertaining weight is outside of the purview of sight, perception cannot apprehend dharma, because dharma is not within its scope.

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25 Lawrence McCrea, "Just Like Us, Just Like Now," 59.

26 Kumāriḷa's skepticism about the testimony of yogis feels unwarranted when juxtaposed with his commitment to the intrinsic validity of cognitions.

27 SM 2.7.1.1 in Freschi 233.

28 Ibid., 237

## V. Dharma as Imperceptible

Though Veṅkaṭanātha and Kumāriḷa have slightly different notions of dharma, informed by their theistic and atheistic commitments, both commentators agree that since dharma is not a object that can be made present, it cannot be perceived. Dharma concerns the "ought" and not the "is," and therefore, one cannot perceive it. Thus, dharma evades the boundaries of perception by definition. Jaimini explains dharma in *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.2, where he writes, "codanalakṣaṇo'rtho dharmah," meaning, dharma is indicated by Vedic injunctions. In his commentary on *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.1, Veṅkaṭanātha asserts that dharma indicates the duties prescribed by Vedic injunctions.<sup>29</sup> Injunctions refer to what should and should not be done.<sup>30</sup> For Veṅkaṭanātha, the injunctions are authoritative on account of being the form of God's command.<sup>31</sup> After all, Veṅkaṭanātha's commentary is called *Seśvaramīmāṃsā*— which translates to "Mīmāṃsā with a God." Conversely, Kumāriḷa would exclude God from his explanation of dharma.

In line with Kumāriḷa's argument, Veṅkaṭanātha, also emphasises the object's presence. He says, "Perception is not a condition [to know] dharma. Why? Because it seizes [only] actual (*vidyamāna*) [objects], that is, because it grasps present (*vartamāna*) objects."<sup>32</sup> Veṅkaṭanātha glosses "*vidyamāna*" as "*vartamāna*," meaning "present," which refers to both spatial and temporal presence. The object of perception cannot exist in the past, future, or at an excessive distance. He moves on to explain how the word "*samprayoga*" helps buttress an argument for presence as he continues, "Why is it so?... Perception is indeed the usage (*prayoga*) of the sense facul-

29 *Dharmaśabdo'tra codanālakṣaṇaśreyaskaravāci* ["Here, the word *dharma* refers to efficacious words having the quality of Vedic injunctions."] (SM 1.3.3 in Freschi 25).

30 SM 1.4.2.1 in Freschi 44.

31 *sa hi īśvarājñāruptayā codana iti ucyate* ["It is said that *codana* (injunctions) are those in the form of *īśvara*'s (god) commands."] (in Freschi 44)

32 SM 2.7.2.1 in Freschi 236.

ties (*indriyāṇām*).<sup>33</sup> Sense faculties cannot connect with an absent object. The object of perception must be nearby and existing at the same time, as in the example of the Washington Monument. Once again, Veṅkaṭanaṭha is succinctly restating arguments that Kumāriḷa made but anticipating new arguments.<sup>34</sup> -

## VI. Dharma as Present

Veṅkaṭanaṭha's *purvapakṣavādin* [an imagined opponent] insists that dharma can be perceptible by claiming that dharma is a present object. In the voice of the objector, the *Seśvaramīmāṃsā* reads, "dharma is indeed present (*vid-*), as something which is being presently done and which has been done, until there is a result. Hence, it must be directly grasped."<sup>35</sup> This statement builds on the earlier argument that "the substances, actions, qualities or other [ritual elements] expressed (*abhilap-*) by the word 'dharma' are established through sense-perception."<sup>36</sup> For example, suppose that in an act of following dharma, you conduct a fire-ritual. The elements of the performance of the sacrificial ritual are visible: you can see the fire, the utensils, the participants, the altar, and the sacrifice. In this manner, one might argue that dharma, as a duty, is present as something being done until the result arises, and therefore, dharma can be perceived. Kumāriḷa and Veṅkaṭanaṭha take slightly different approaches in refuting this imagined objection.

When Kumāriḷa handles the claim that dharma is perceptible, he also emphasizes that both actions and their result cannot be perceived simultaneously. He writes:

Dharma is perceptible neither prior to its execution nor after it has been carried

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33 *Ibid.*, 236.

34 Kumāriḷa closely analyzes the word "satsamprayoge" in his commentary to further refute direct perception, which Veṅkaṭanaṭha briefly alludes to. In short, the word "sat" excludes "asat" or non-existent objects. See Taber 2005, 58-64.

35 SM 2.7.2.1 in Freschi 236.

36 *Ibid.*, 233.

out, since it does not exist at that time as a means of bringing about its result. Moreover, since it is an apprehension of that which is present, like our own perception, the perception of meditators is not believed to pertain to Dharma, because it is perception.<sup>37</sup>

If the opponents claim to perceive dharma as a present object, the objects of their perception are merely qualities or actions being performed, not dharma itself. To return to the example of the fire-ritual, one can perceive the altar, ghee, and fire, but they are not apprehending dharma itself. Kumārila again equates yogic perception to ordinary perception, which requires a present object to be perceived. To perceive dharma would require perceiving the result of the duty at the same time that it is performed, but this is impossible.<sup>38</sup> Dharma is neither the physical ritual performance, nor is it the flourishing that results from performing dharma.<sup>39</sup> Veṅkaṭaṇātha spells this concept out in more detail below.

Veṅkaṭaṇātha, like Kumārila, wishes to prove that you cannot see dharma itself. The performance of duty is present in this situation and hence perceptible, but the consequences or merits are not. He begins with a scenario, imploring the opponent to imagine perceiving dharma. He writes, "suppose, to begin with, that the own nature of a substance or [a quality or an action] is perceived through direct perception as 'dharma' in the form 'this is dharma,' in the same way as one perceives that something is a pot."<sup>40</sup> Veṅkaṭaṇātha implicitly asks the opponent how dharma is perceived—does it possess a certain quality of being dharma (or 'dharma-ness'), in the same way a pot has the quality of being a pot? When Veṅkaṭaṇātha's argument is reformulated as a rhetorical question, it highlights his thinly veiled ridicule of perceiving dharma.

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37 *Pratyakṣaḥ prāganuṣṭhānān na dharmo'nuṣṭhito'pi vā | Phalasādhanaṛupena tadānīm tena nāstyasau (Ślokaṁvārttika 34) Asmatpratyakṣacavvāpi visyamānopalambhanam | Pratyakṣamdhāyinām dharme pratyakṣatvāt ca neṣyate (Ślokaṁvārttika 35) (John Taber 2005, 56.)*

38 *Ibid.*, 56.

39 *Ibid.*, 56.

40 *yadi tavai ayam ghaṭam itivad ayam dharma iti dravyādisvarupan dharmatayā pratyakṣena dṛṣyate (SM 1.6.2.1 in Freschi 61, and SM 2.7.2.1 in Freschi 236)*

At large, Veṅkaṭanātha is drawing a contrast between the realms of ontology and deontology: the pot belongs to the former, while dharma belongs to the latter. A pot can be sense perceptible because of its qualities (*dravyādi*), and the elements of a sacrificial fire-ritual, such as the heat of the fire or the smell of ghee, can be perceived. In contrast, dharma, which is something that ought to be done, is not perceptible. Only ontological things are perceptible, and dharma is deontological. By this token, one can perceive dharmic actions—insofar as they are mediated by ontological beings— but you cannot see dharma itself.

## VII. Presence in Inference

Veṅkaṭanātha goes one step further than Kumāriḷa, as he handles inferability of dharma in line with perceptibility by connecting the two, while Kumāriḷa waits until verse 87 to refute inference as a means of knowing dharma. In the voice of the opponent, Veṅkaṭanātha first raises the objection that one can infer the presence of dharma based on perceivable results.<sup>41</sup> This argument takes for granted the South Asian worldviews on *karma*, meaning that results follow action, even across lives: actions sow seeds that reap fruit in the future. For example, one could be miserable in this life and infer that is the case because of their wrongdoings in past lives. Veṅkaṭanātha continues to emphasise how even inferability is impossible, precisely because dharma cannot be perceived. Kumāriḷa does not go as far as refuting inference in his commentary of *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.4 but makes similar arguments in *Ślokaṁvārttika* 34. If there was a recurring invariable concomitance between performing an act and receiving merits, then it would need to have been perceived once. For example, when you infer the presence of fire because there is smoke on a mountain, it is because you have seen fire and smoke exist simultaneously before. For dharma, it has never been the case

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41 SM 1.6.1.2 in Freschi 70.

that the dharmic act and desired result have been perceived together at the same time. Veṅkaṭanātha writes about the imperceptibility of dharma:

[But], since the [desired] result consisting in heaven etc. is not fit (*ayogya*) to be seized (*upalambh-*) at the present time, because of the fact that it will occur in another body, one cannot grasp (*grah-*) that [the dharma] is the instrument to realise it. Nor does the action last until the [desired] result [arises] (so that one could perceive them together).<sup>42</sup>

Drawing on the concept of reincarnation, Veṅkaṭanātha gives the example of reaching *svarga* or the abode of the *devas*. Veṅkaṭanātha, as a Viśiṣṭādvaitian, imagines *devas* as quasi-divine supernatural beings waiting to attain liberation. In principle, reaching *svarga* depicts how one who performs pious deeds in this life attains a greater abode in the next. The realm of the *devas*, or *svarga*, is higher than the human realm, and one can strive towards reaching this elevated existence by performing good deeds in their human birth. While one must use the human body to carry out pious actions, they must shed their human body before becoming a *deva* in *svarga*. It is impossible to perceive both the actions and their result simultaneously since both cannot happen at the same time—the fruits of dharma will not arise until the action is completed. There is a temporal gap between performing an action and attaining its result: the two cannot coexist, says Veṅkaṭanātha. Because the fruits of performing dharmic acts do not manifest until a future moment, dharma cannot be grasped in the present. Since actions cannot occur at the same time as their results, the results will always follow action. Veṅkaṭanātha elaborates on this idea:

Therefore, since at the level of the result (i.e., at the moment of its arising) there is no act (*karman*), and at the level of the act there is no result, it is impossible for us to grasp the relation of thing to be realized and instrument realizing it inhering in both (since we never grasp them together) (SM 2.7.2.1 in Freschi 237).

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42 Ibid., 236

By illustrating this temporal gap between action and result, Veṅkaṭanātha is arguing that if one cannot perceive the action and the result simultaneously, how can one argue that dharma is the connecting instrument? He implicitly pushes back on the notion that dharma can be inferred by seeing a result. The notion of presence not only rules out perception as a means of knowing dharma, but it also rules out inference, which has perception as its base. We cannot perceive the action and its result at the same time. Furthermore, there are far too many variables involved in a life of meritorious actions, so dharma cannot be singled out as the sole cause.

### VIII. Apūrva and the case for Presence

When Veṅkaṭanātha expands upon why dharma is not perceptible, he references a Pūrvamīmāṃsā concept called *apūrva*. In his text *Tantravārttika*, Kumāṛila offers *apūrva* as a type of potency created by the dharmic action that leads up to the result (Johnson 24). *Apūrva* bridges the temporal gap between the ritual and its result, instead of what the opponent might have imagined was dharma. When the opponent claims to apprehend dharma as a continuous sequence of events, each of which is perceivable at the moment it transpires, Veṅkaṭanātha seems to be suggesting that what they are actually perceiving is *apūrva*, not dharma. Unlike dharma, *apūrva* is not deontic, and therefore can be perceived by certain people.

Veṅkaṭanātha diverges from Kumāṛila in his explanation of *apūrva* as he explains that ordinary people cannot perceive *apūrva* despite its being permanent. In this subsection of refuting the perceptibility of dharma, Veṅkaṭanātha shows his theistic commitment. He writes:

The unseen potency (*apūrva*) which is realised by the action, though permanent (*sthira*), is not perceivable by people like us. This consists, in fact, in the favour (*anugraha*) of the Deity [to whom the sacrifice has been performed]. For, the intention of one (the pleased Deity who wishes to favour the sacrificer) cannot reach perceptibility by another. (Hence, *apūrva* is imperceptible because it consists in the Deity's having been pleased, and the intention of one (the Deity

who has been pleased) is not perceptible by another (a person like us)). (SM 2.7.2.1 in Freschi 236)

In short, only someone with a certain disposition can perceive *apūrvā*. In line with his *seśvara* [theistic] Mīmāṃsā, he argues that the grace of an appeased deity is itself *apūrvā*. God (equated with Deity), pleased by a ritual, grants the merits of dharmic actions. Veṅkaṭaṇātha seems to be endorsing the Viśiṣṭādvaita conceptualization of God as *sarvakarmaphalaprādātā*, or God as one who bestows the fruits of all actions. Furthermore, this statement reveals that Veṅkaṭaṇātha's God is not able to be known, akin to the statement that "God works in mysterious ways," referring to how God's intentions cannot be perceived. Here, Veṅkaṭaṇātha employs classical Mīmāṃsā ontological and epistemological strategies and adds a metaphysical level, namely, reinterpretation in a theistic sense. His goal, in doing so, seems to be to establish that, since grace cannot be shared with others but is only available to the performer of the sacrifice, not everyone can perceive *apūrvā*. He summarises his final position as he writes that "hence, it is very correct (*sādhu*) to say that the cause for the fact that direct perception cannot grasp dharma is the fact that [direct perception] seizes [only] present things."

Given Kumāriḷa's response to the perception of the yogis as a way to know dharma, I suspect that he would not give *apūrvā* the special grant that Veṅkaṭaṇātha does. Obvious theistic differences aside, Kumāriḷa would likely take issue with Veṅkaṭaṇātha's phrase "by people like us." According to McCrea, Kumāriḷa argues that yogic perception is not a way of knowing dharma because it is not accessible to ordinary people.<sup>43</sup> If ordinary people, similarly, cannot perceive *apūrvā*, then how could a special person's claim be verified? Even if the phenomenon of perceiving *apūrvā* might exist, ordinary people like us cannot know for sure, because we do not have

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43 Lawrence McCrea, "Just Like Us, Just Like Now."



access to such states. Because Kumāriḷa's atheist standpoint excludes the possibility of someone having any type of supernormal access, I do not imagine he would agree with Veṅkaṭanātha when discussing *apūrvā*.

Veṅkaṭanātha's argument for *apūrvā* is reminiscent of arguments made in favour of the perceptibility of dharma. The *purvapakṣavadin* offered arguments that used similar lines of logic, such as the previously described argument about a jeweller. Why is *apūrvā* perceptible, and why is this same argument not transferable to the case of perceiving dharma—could elevated people not see dharma? *Apūrvā* is permanent and thereby exists in the present, but dharma is still not present and unable to be perceived. When objectors make counterfactual arguments from authority, arguing that a person with specialised vision claims to see dharma, I imagine that Veṅkaṭanātha would tell them that they are actually perceiving *apūrvā*, not dharma.

## IX. Final Comparisons and Conclusions

Having examined Veṅkaṭanātha's and Kumāriḷa's refutation of the perceptibility of dharma through reading their commentaries on *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.4, it seems that both have similar ideas about perception and presence. Both read the *sūtra* as excluding perception as a way of knowing dharma by focusing on the word "vidyamāna," which means present. Since dharma is not present as an ontic object, but rather, is deontic, it cannot be an object of perception. Both agree that when one claims to perceive dharma as a present object, they are perceiving the qualities or actions performed, but never dharma itself. Nor can dharma be perceived through processes of causation since the ritual action and desired fruit cannot coexist: the former always precedes the latter. It often seems as if both are making the same argument with merely structural differences. For example, Veṅkaṭanātha spends more time on the causality and inferability in line with perception as described in *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.4, while Kumāriḷa handles inferability later on in his commentary. Additionally,

having lived centuries after Kumāriḷa, Veṅkaṭanaṯha is tasked with refuting objections that have evolved and become more powerful. Besides organisational differences, Veṅkaṭanaṯha adds a distinctly theistic element in his analysis of *apūrvā* that I suggest Kumāriḷa would reject.

Less explored in this paper, but important for understanding his aims, is Veṅkaṭanaṯha's strong devotionalism. Veṅkaṭanaṯha is known for his Sanskrit stotras, or praise-hymns, and in some ways, his poetry functioned as a performance of his devotional practices.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, his devotional practices permeate his philosophical writings—although God did not play a central role in Veṅkaṭanaṯha's epistemic justification of *śabda*.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, his Srivaisnava commitments explain the insertion of God in even less obviously theistic arguments. This *sūtra* seems to have little to do with devotion, but in a discussion of epistemology, Veṅkaṭanaṯha's piety is nonetheless included. This connection stems from the Srivaisnava belief that *jīvas* [individual souls, like that of Veṅkaṭanaṯha] are God-centric, rather than self-centric, and these *jīvas* are fully reliant on God.<sup>46</sup> Srivaisnavas also espouse that *prapatti* (surrender), and the *bhakti* (devotion) it produces, are forms of knowledge.<sup>47</sup> Veṅkaṭanaṯha's philosophical engagement might represent *bhakti* as knowledge, the right kind of which can lead to ultimate liberation.<sup>48</sup> In other words, while God does not become the reason for epistemic justification, God is nonetheless present as a gravitational force around which Veṅkaṭanaṯha thinks.

In her discussion of adaptive reuse, Elisa Freschi discusses how authors of

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44 Veṅkaṭanaṯha was known as *kavitārṅkikaśiṃha*, or "lion amongst poets and logicians." (Shiv Subramaniam. "How a Philosopher Reads Kālidāsa: Vedāntadeśika's Art of Devotion." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 49, no. 1 (2021): 45-46.)

45 Elisa Freschi, "We Resort to Reason: The Argumentative Structure in Veṅkaṭanaṯha's *Seśvaramīmāṃsā*," *Dialogue with Classical Indian Traditions* (Routledge, 2019), 77.

46 John N. Sheveland, *Piety and Responsibility: Patterns of Unity in Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Vedānta Deshika* (Routledge, 2016), 121.

47 *Ibid.*, 119, 198.

48 *Ibid.*, 128.

Mīmāṃsā texts usually did not explicitly quote passages that were from authors of their own school, but quoted passages belonging to other schools.<sup>49</sup> She writes that "in this way, the reuser endorsed his own tradition and explicitly distanced himself from other schools of thought."<sup>50</sup> Such processes occur in Veṅkaṭanaṯha's *Sveśvaramīmāṃsā*. Throughout his commentary on *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.4, Veṅkaṭanaṯha does not quote Kumarila once. As Elisa Freschi says, Kumarila's contributions are "silently embedded" into the *Sveśvaramīmāṃsā* text.<sup>51</sup> The structure of his commentary itself suggests that Veṅkaṭanaṯha, though situated within Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, understands his scholarship as a continuation of the Mīmāṃsā philosophical system.

On a broader scale, Veṅkaṭanaṯha's arguments in *Seśvaramīmāṃsā* largely parallel Kumarila's in *Ślokaṁvārttika*. Elisa Freschi's framework of "adaptive reuse" best explains the relationship between Veṅkaṭanaṯha and Kumarila. Veṅkaṭanaṯha is the "consciously acting agent, who, in order to achieve a certain purpose" of establishing Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta as a continuation of *Purvamīmāṃsā*, "resumes the usage of" Kumarila's 'clearly identifiable' *Ślokaṁvārttikā* after many centuries.<sup>52</sup> Veṅkaṭanaṯha would expect his "audience to recognize the reused elements" of *Purvamīmāṃsā*, re-used for the purpose of "adding prestige, credibility, etc. to the newly created" *Seśvaramīmāṃsā* commentary.<sup>53</sup> Veṅkaṭanaṯha's *Seśvaramīmāṃsā* adopted so much of Kumarila's prior content in an effort to "propound the idea of the existence of an *aikaśāstrya* 'unity of the teaching.'"<sup>54</sup> The content of *Seśvaramīmāṃsā* is still identifiable as a continuation of the Mīmāṃsā tradition, but Veṅkaṭanaṯha puts forth a specifically theistic doctrine through his commentary. The process is best encapsulated

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49 Elisa Freschi and Philipp A. Maas, *Adaptive Reuse: Aspects of Creativity in South Asian Cultural History* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 17.

50 *Ibid.*, 17.

51 *Ibid.*, 17.

52 *Ibid.*, 13.

53 *Ibid.*, 15.

54 *Ibid.*, 283.

in the name of his commentary, “*Seśvaramīmāṃsā*,” which is Mimamsa with a God. Thus, Veṅkaṭanātha situates the *Seśvaramīmāṃsā* “within a continuous and illustrious tradition” through this process of adaptive reuse.<sup>55</sup>

Making God compatible with a historically Godless doctrine is not only difficult, but radical, and this brief exploration regarding the perceptibility of dharma begins to illuminate Veṅkaṭanātha’s strategies of inserting devotionism in his philosophical ventures. Veṅkaṭanātha’s analysis of *apūrva* signifies a break in Kumārila’s Purvamīmāṃsā tradition, as he introduces God while reusing Kumārila’s atheistic doctrine. While *apūrva* for Kumārila bridged the temporal gap between ritual and result, Veṅkaṭanātha sees *apūrva* as God’s active grace on the performer of the ritual. Veṅkaṭanātha inserts God into a concept that Kumārila had previously conceptualised as God-less, but nonetheless, rather than claiming novelty, Veṅkaṭanātha situates himself as a thinker of the same tradition, perhaps in an effort to bolster the authority of his school’s ideas by aligning it with a respected school of the past. This brief venture into the perceptibility of dharma reveals Veṅkaṭanātha’s theistic commitments and conceptualisation of God’s role as he cleverly adapts and reuses Purvamīmāṃsā concepts for his arguments.

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55 Ibid., 17.

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