

THE MĪMĀMSĀ REFUTATION OF IDEALISM

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1. Plan

- *The Target.* In his commentary (*bhāṣya*) on the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra* 1.1.5, Śabara (circa 5th century CE) targets a certain Yogācāra doctrine:

SUPPORTLESSNESS. No awareness-event (*jñāna*), i.e., conscious experience or thought, has an *external objective support* (*bāhyālabhana*), i.e., an object which is apprehended by the awareness-event and is distinct from the awareness-event or any of its aspects.

This entails:

EPISTEMOLOGICAL IDEALISM. There is no mind-independent particular or property that is apprehended by our awareness-events.

With some more assumptions, we can arrive at the claim that there is no mind-independent particular or property *tout court*.

- *My Plan.* I will do two things.
 - I will present Śabara’s arguments against SUPPORTLESSNESS.
 - I will then show how, in his sub-commentary *Detailed Commentary in Verse* (*Śloka-vārttika*), Kumārila strengthens the case against SUPPORTLESSNESS.

2. Śabara on Supportlessness

- *The Context.* The debate about SUPPORTLESSNESS takes off from Śabara’s discussion of the distinction between *good* and *bad* cases of perception.

1. A good or *veridical* case of perception (*sat-pratyakṣa*) involves a perceptual awareness of an object *o* as *F*, which is caused by a contact (*samprayoga*) between a person’s senses and *o* and its *F*-ness.
2. A bad or non-veridical case of perception (*mithyā-pratyakṣa*) involves a perceptual awareness of an object *o* as *F*, which is caused due to a contact (*samprayoga*) between a person’s senses and an object *o* that doesn’t possess *F*-ness.

Example: when I veridically perceive a banana as crescent-shaped, my perceptual experience is caused by the perceptual contact between my visual sense and the banana along with its shape.

Example: Out for a walk on the beach, when I misperceive a mother-of-pearl as silver, my perceptual experience may be caused by perceptual contact with the mother-of-pearl, but there is no contact with any piece of silver or its silver-hood.

For Śābara, non-veridical perception always is a result of a defect (*doṣa*) either in the agent's outer senses (sight, touch, etc.) or her inner sense (*manas*, i.e., her faculty of attention), which prevents them from being in contact with the right features of the object.

- *How Do We Determine Whether We Are In A Good Case of Perception?* According to Śābara, if we investigate carefully and find no defects in our senses, then we should be sure that we are in a good case of perception.

THE REQUIREMENT OF DEFAULT TRUST. If an agent has no reason to suspect the causal conditions that give rise to her awareness-events are defective in any way, she should treat the content of her awareness-events as true.

This principle is later taken up by Kumārila in his *Detailed Commentary* on MS 1.1.2, where he defends the theory of "intrinsic knowledgehood" (*svataḥ-prāmāṇya*), i.e., the view that we should treat our conscious experiences or thoughts as knowledge (which is just true awareness on this view) as long as we don't have any rebutting or undercutting evidence against them.

- *The Challenge.* The distinction between good and bad cases of perception doesn't make much sense, since our perceptual experiences don't apprehend anything other than themselves or their own aspects.

P1. The experiences we undergo in dreams, etc. have no intentional objects that are distinct from the experiences themselves or their aspects.

P2. Our waking awareness-events, e.g., the perceptual experience as of a pillar, etc., are similar in all relevant respects to our experiences in dreams, etc.

C. Our waking awareness-events, e.g., the awareness as of a pillar, etc., have no intentional objects that are distinct from the awareness-events themselves or their aspects.

What are these relevant similarities that P2 refers to? Śābara thinks that the relevant similarity has to be a common property shared by all awareness-events: namely, *awareness-hood* (*pratyayatva*).

- *An Alternative Formulation.* In that case, we have an alternative formulation of the same argument:

The Thesis. The awareness as of a pillar, etc. is supportless.

The Statement of the Reason. For it is an awareness-event.

The Illustration. Anything that is an awareness-event is supportless, e.g., a dream-experience.

The *site* of the inference is the awareness of a pillar, etc. The *target property* (i.e., the property to be proved) is supportlessness. The *reason* (i.e., the property that provides evidence for the target property) is awareness-hood.

- *Śābara's Response.* There is a disanalogy between our waking experiences and our dream experiences.

1. The Buddhist argument, if sound, would show that many of our ordinary waking experiences are false. But we are required by REQUIREMENT OF DEFAULT TRUST to think that many of our waking awareness-events are true. For we can't find any defect in the way they are produced.
 2. This is not how things are with dream experiences: (i) dream experiences are later rebutted by waking experiences (and thus revealed to be erroneous) and (ii) there is a natural explanation for why they are produced by a defective mechanism.
- *A Problem.* Why can't we say that the Buddhist argument itself constitutes evidence against the truth of our waking awareness-events?
 - *Kumārila's Insight.*
 - In order for an argument to produce knowledge of its conclusion, we need to certain kinds of distinctions: the distinction amongst the site, the target property, and the reason, the distinction between awareness and content, and so on.
 - If SUPPORTLESSNESS is true, none of those distinctions are ultimately real.

Upshot: the Buddhist argument undermines itself.

3. Dismantling the Buddhist Argument

3.1 Problems With The Thesis

- *The Problem of Defeat.*
 1. First, the thesis is refuted by perceptual evidence: we are certain, on the basis of well-confirmed perceptual awareness-events, that there are mind-independent objects of awareness (v. 30cd).
 2. Second, we have inference-based evidence against the **Thesis**: there is an equally, if not more, plausible counterargument to the opposite conclusion (vv. 79cd-80ab):
 - The Thesis.** The judgement, "Some awareness-events have as their objective support external objects" is correct.
 - The Reason.** For it doesn't have a rebutting defeater (*bādhaka*), i.e., evidence that shows that it is false.
 - The Illustration.** If any experience or thought is without a rebutting defeater, then it is correct, e.g., the experience by which dreams are rebutted.
- *The Problem of Self-Undermining.* The thesis is self-undermining.

Why? It seems that our ordinary perceptual experiences are not only about mind-independent particulars and properties, but are also caused by them. So, if they are truly supportless, then what they represent to be the case can't quite be true.

Here, the Buddhist could resort to:
REFLEXIVISM. Any awareness-event constitutes an awareness of itself.

In his *Compendium of Epistemology* (*Pramāṇa-samuccaya*, henceforth PS) 1.11-12ab, Dignāga defends REFLEXIVISM. In response to Kumārila, the Buddhist could turn this into a stronger claim, i.e., that an awareness-event apprehends nothing other than itself or its aspects. But, according to Kumārila, REFLEXIVISM is independently implausible (v. 32).

1. First, the conclusion of any argument makes sense only insofar as it involves two components. The first is a qualificand (*viśeṣya*), i.e., the site. Here, the qualificand is the *awareness of a pillar, etc.* The second is a qualifier (*viśeṣaṇa*), i.e., the target property that is inferred. In this case, it is *supportlessness*. But if SUPPORTLESSNESS is true, then there can't be any distinction between the qualificand and the qualifier (v. 35).
2. *Impossibility of Communication*. The awareness of the qualificand and the qualifier, which arises in both the speaker and the hearer, doesn't apprehend anything distinct from it. But the view that is being conveyed by the **Thesis** itself can be understood or known only if there are such objects.
3. *Impossibility of Truth/Accuracy*. Finally, if all awareness-events lack an objective support, then it's impossible to undergo any true or accurate awareness at all (since truth, intuitively, involves some kind of correspondence with an independent reality). But then the argument can't be shown to be sound.

3.2 Problems With The Reason

The reason—awareness-hood—suffers from (at least) two defects.

- *The Reason Is Unestablished for the Buddhist*.
 1. Since the Buddhists don't accept the existence of anything other than discrete awareness-events, they can't accept the existence of a general property like awareness-hood that is distinct from the awareness-events themselves.
 2. But, then, when asked, "What's your reason for thinking that all awareness-events are supportless?", they can't say, "They possess awareness-hood." For that would undermine their own view.
- *The Reason Conflicts With the Target Property*. For Kumāriḷa, every awareness-event—i.e., everything that possesses awareness-hood—has an external objective support.
 1. Even a dream-experience has an external objective support. For we only dream of things that we have experienced earlier.
 2. More generally, the following theory of error is true.

THEORY OF OTHERWISE PRESENTATION. Any erroneous awareness-event as of an object *o* being *F* at a certain place and time has as its intentional objects both the object *o* and the property of *F*-ness (both of which must exist somewhere at some time and must have been apprehended by the relevant subject).

Example: when I undergo the perceptual awareness as of there being a piece of silver before me even though all I perceive is a mother-of-pearl, the intentional objects of my awareness are the thing before me—i.e., the mother-of-pearl—and the properties I ascribe to it—i.e., being before me and silverhood—which I've experienced before.

Given that the THEORY OF OTHERWISE PRESENTATION is equally—if not more—explanatorily powerful as SUPPORTLESSNESS, there may indeed be a conflict between awareness-hood and supportlessness.

3.3 The Relationship Between the Thesis and the Reason

- *The Problem*, Kumārila argues that the relationship between the **Thesis** and the reason suffers from a problem that, according to the Nyāya rules of debate, constitutes a *defeat-situation* (*nigrahassthāna*) in a debate. Why?
 1. If awareness-events were to lack external objective support, then one couldn't undergo an awareness-event which has awareness-hood as its external objective support.
 2. If one couldn't undergo an awareness-event which has awareness-hood as its external objective support, one couldn't come to know on that basis that awareness-events lack an external objective support.

This defeat-situation is called *conflict with the thesis* (*pratijñāvirodha*) in *Nyāya-sūtra* 5.2.4 (v. 154).

- *A Natural Solution*. The Buddhist could make the following move:

My strategy is one of throwing away the ladder. First, I shall prove the target property by means of this commonly recognised reason. But then, I'll show that if the reason succeeds in proving that property, it itself ultimately doesn't exist. What's wrong with that?

- *Response*. In response, Kumārila defends:

KUMĀRILA'S NO FALSE LEMMAS PRINCIPLE. In any inference, if an agent comes to know that a site *o* possesses a target property *S*, on the basis of premise that it possesses a reason *H*, then *o* must possess *H*.

What explains this principle?

1. For Kumārila, knowledge (*pramā*) or correct awareness (*samyagjñāna*) is just true awareness. On that reading, the KUMĀRILA'S NO FALSE LEMMAS PRINCIPLE appears false. Consider:

Smoke/Mist. You look at a far-away hill, and see what looks like smoke emerging from it. So, you judge that there is smoke on the hill. Since you know that fire always accompanies smoke, you infer, “There’s fire on the hill.” In fact, what you saw was just mist, but there is in fact fire on the hill.

2. The appearances are deceptive. For Kumāriila, the target property of any inference is individuated with reference to the reason on the basis of which it is inferred. So, in *Smoke/Mist*, the target property that you infer is that the fire that accompanies the smoke you took yourself to see. Since that fire is absent from the hill, your judgement isn’t true.

In the Buddhist argument for supportlessness, the property of awareness-hood that the Buddhist ascribes to waking awareness-events is much like the smoke that you ascribe to the hill in *Smoke/Mist*; it’s not really there. One cannot know the ultimate truth on the basis of such a false reason.

4. Conclusion

Kumāriila’s arguments reveal that the Yogācāra Buddhist, if she indeed wants to *argue* for SUPPORTLESSNESS, is engaged in an impossible task.

1. In order to argue SUPPORTLESSNESS, she must rely on distinctions that are incompatible with the very conclusion she’s arguing for.
2. As a result, either she’s end up undermining whatever claim she’s argues for, or the claim itself can’t be ultimately true.

But if the arguments themselves don’t succeed, we’ll always have the REQUIREMENT OF DEFAULT TRUST to fall back on. That will require us to take at face value our ordinary experiences as of there being a world of external objects.