

## Reconciling Perception and Dharma:

### A Vedic Perspective on Time and Knowledge in Kumārila's Philosophy

In Taber's work, "A Hindu Critique of Buddhist Epistemology," Kumārila tackles the concept of perception in MS 1.1.4 and asserts that perception cannot serve as a means to comprehend Dharma. His argument revolves around the idea that perception apprehends objects in the present, while Dharma's outcomes lie in the future. This distinction holds significance because, according to Kumārila, only the Veda can be a valid means of understanding Dharma. However, I contend that the definition of perception presented in MS 1.1.4 can be a viable method for comprehending Dharma. Kumārila defends the Veda's eternality, resulting in a unique Vedic concept of time that amalgamates past, present, and future into an ever-existing present. Given this perspective, when perception, as defined in MS 1.1.4, apprehends an object in the present, it extends the possibility of grasping the outcomes of Dharma in the future. This is possible because the Vedic conception of time posits an eternal continuum where past, present, and future coexist. Consequently, the proposed definition of perception in MS 1.1.4 can be a legitimate means of gaining knowledge about Dharma.

Kumārila's discussion centers around four pivotal sūtras, as outlined by Taber:

1. Now, therefore, the inquiry into Dharma.
2. Dharma is a purpose or goal distinguished by an injunction.
3. An investigation into its foundation is underway.
4. The emergence of cognition is when an individual's sense faculties connect with an existing object; this is perception. However, it does not serve as a foundation for

comprehending Dharma, as it only pertains to apprehending present objects.

These four sūtras form the core of Kumārila's discourse on this subject.

Kumārila firmly asserts that the initial segment of MS 1.1.4 neither furnishes a precise definition of perception nor serves as a valid method for acquiring knowledge about Dharma. In his own words, he insists that "he who defines perception through a division of the sūtra must elucidate the link between the sūtra and the preceding assertion" (45). Taber clarifies that if we consider the first three sūtras to be concerned with Dharma, then the purpose behind introducing a definition of perception in MS 1.1.4 could be to exclude it as a means of comprehending Dharma. As Kumārila ponders, "By virtue of which... would a statement of a definition [of perception] serve a purpose?" (45), Taber elucidates that an action carried out in the present, which results in a future consequence, remains beyond the scope of knowledge. This is because the present action is apprehended through perception, which deals exclusively with objects in the present, while the outcome of Dharma pertains to the future. This dilemma arises because time, in its Vedic interpretation as an eternally existing present, does not allow for the simultaneous apprehension of both present and future objects. Consequently, perception cannot serve as a means of understanding Dharma, as it is inherently limited to apprehending objects existing in the present.

While it is evident that perception, as delineated in MS 1.1.4, is not a viable means of comprehending Dharma, Kumārila raises a perplexing question regarding the absence of definitions for other pramāṇas in the same sūtra. He queries, "Why is a definition of inference, and other pramāṇas, not provided here? It cannot be argued that they are not

pramāṇas, nor can it be asserted that they are encompassed within perceptual cognition, nor that they share the identical definition as perception" (46). As outlined by Taber, the overarching issue of whether perception inherently encompasses all other pramāṇas remains a point of contention across various schools of classical Indian philosophy. Consequently, it would be inappropriate to assume that perception automatically subsumes the other pramāṇas or that they share identical definitions. So, what precisely are these other pramāṇas that remain undefined in the sūtra? Could it be possible that they have some form of dependence on perception?

Kumārila's argument emphasizes that defining the other pramāṇas as somehow reliant on perception constitutes an overly broad characterization. As he points out, "it is not established that everything dependent on perception qualifies as a pramāṇa" (46). Taber provides further insight, illustrating that if every pramāṇa were dependent on perception, then memory would also be classified as a pramāṇa, given its dependence on perception. However, Taber highlights that memory neither holds the status of a pramāṇa in Indian philosophy nor apprehends objects present in the here and now, as there is no sensory connection to present objects within memory. Taber then raises an intriguing question: could it be that perception, at the very least, presupposes the existence of the other pramāṇas? If Kumārila argues that perception can be defined entirely independently of the other pramāṇas, it follows that perception does not presuppose their definitions. In summary, "it is not accurate to assert that there is an indirect indication" within perception, as stated in MS 1.1.4, of the definitions of the other pramāṇas (47). Consequently, the other pramāṇas cannot be assumed to be contingent on perception.

Taber elucidates that Kumāṛila arrives at this conclusion because even the proposed definition of perception in the first half of MS 1.1.4 does not inherently imply that the other pramāṇas are contingent on it. Kumāṛila explicitly states, "nor can one deduce, from the definition of perception, any way to ascertain...the specific definitions, nature, or number of the other pramāṇas" (47). As Taber further expounds, Kumāṛila emphasizes that defining the other pramāṇas as reliant on perception is an unsatisfactory approach because it is arbitrary. He argues that "if one were to arbitrarily assert that the other pramāṇas depend on perception based solely on the definition of perception, one could just as easily assert the opposite!" (47). Taber proceeds to narrate that Kumāṛila reasons that the first half of MS 1.1.4, as it stands, does not provide a conclusive solution to this matter. Consequently, he entertains the possibility that the definitions of the other pramāṇas might be so commonly understood that there is no need to articulate them explicitly.

Despite the earlier question, Kumāṛila firmly contends that a generic definition of perception will not satisfactorily resolve the issue. He argues that "if individual definitions are not provided because they are already widely known, then this would equally apply to perception" (48), illustrating the proposed definition's arbitrary nature. Taber explains that if the author of the sūtra aims to define perception as merely one among the pramāṇas, it leads to perplexing and absurd conjectures: Does MS 1.1.4 imply that perception is the sole pramāṇa? Could the sūtra be a product of the author's confusion? How can the proposed definition be considered a valid means of comprehending Dharma? Additionally, it raises the troubling possibility that the proposed definition violates a

fundamental principle of Mīmāṃsaka exegesis: "If the sūtra can be a single sentence, a division of the sentence is not warranted" (48). According to Taber, Kumāṛila surmises that his Mīmāṃsaka opponent may be attempting precisely what is not warranted by breaking down the sūtra. Consequently, Kumāṛila concludes that the proposed definition of perception in the first half of MS 1.1.4 is fundamentally flawed.

Furthermore, this proposed definition of perception leads to a problematic consequence: it implies the occurrence of perceptual errors. Kumāṛila expresses this concern by stating that "a cognition in a dream, for example, arises without the involvement of a sensory connection to an object [and therefore cannot be classified as perception]... However, perceptual errors can only occur when there is a sensory connection to certain objects" [and thus, must qualify as perception] (48). Taber provides an illustrative example of this concept with the case of mistakenly identifying a piece of mother-of-pearl as silver. This misperception, akin to a dream, could be categorized as perception because, as indicated in the first half of MS 1.1.4, there is a sensory connection with an object. However, Kumāṛila objects to this classification, asserting that it is, in fact, a perceptual error, and what transpires in a dream cannot be deemed as perception. Consequently, the example cannot involve a perceptual error since it occurs "without any interaction between the sensory faculty and the object" (48). Thus, Kumāṛila concludes that the proposed definition of perception is fundamentally flawed.

Nevertheless, Kumāṛila acknowledges that reordering certain words in the first half of MS 1.1.4 makes it possible to arrive at a more accurate description of perception. He notes that the original wording fails to specify the object with which the sensory faculty

establishes a connection. Thus, if we rearrange the words "sat" and "tat" in the original definition, transforming it from "the arising of a cognition when there is a connection of the sense faculties of a person with an existing (sat) object, that (tat) is perception," to "the arising of a cognition when there is a connection of the sense faculties of a person with that (tat) [same object that appears in the cognition] is true (sat) perception" (49), Kumāṛila accepts this as a valid definition of perception. However, even though he accepts such a refined definition of perception, Kumāṛila still maintains that this proposed definition cannot serve as a "basis of knowledge of Dharma because it is [still] the apprehension of that which is present" (49). This is the specific conclusion I will now delve into, as I believe that, even within his accepted definition of perception, perception can be a viable means of acquiring knowledge about Dharma. This perspective becomes plausible when considering a Vedic concept of time as an ever-existing present due to its eternal nature.

Let us begin by addressing the matter of perceptual errors. In my perspective, even if the proposed definition of perception, as articulated in the first half of MS 1.1.4, is deemed inaccurate because it seemingly allows for perceptual errors to be categorized as instances of perception, this does not negate the fact that a perceptual error is, fundamentally, an error occurring within a perceptual process. As the error is identified and corrected, genuine perception comes to light. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the phrase "an error in a perception" grammatically places the noun "error" in the nominative case concerning "perception" in the locative case. This construction signifies that perception serves as the context within which the error is situated, as previously mentioned. In essence, error is nominally situated within the sphere of perception.

Therefore, since perception forms the foundation for the occurrence of errors, it is not valid to argue that a perceptual error cannot be considered an instance of perception. After all, a perceptual error, being an error within a perception, cannot disregard the perceptual framework within which it is situated. One may also observe that since perception is inherently factive, it, by definition, cannot be erroneous. This aligns with my viewpoint that a perceptual error, being an error within perception, cannot, by definition, be erroneous either. Hence, it may qualify as an instance of accurate perception once the error within the perceptual process has been rectified. In summary, the crux of the matter lies not in the concept of "perceptual error" itself but rather in the error. This, however, does not preclude the possibility of categorizing a perceptual error as an instance of perception.

It is essential to highlight that perception cannot be categorized as a type of perceptual awareness event when an error is involved due to its factive nature. This fact raises a crucial point: Kumāriḷa's accepted definition of perception, wherein "the arising of cognition when there is a connection of the sense faculties of a person with that (tat) [same object that appears in the cognition] is true (sat) perception" (49), is fundamentally flawed. To illustrate this, let us consider the example of a dream. According to Kumāriḷa's accepted definition of perception, a dream is viewed as a pseudo-perceptual awareness event since there is no sensory connection with an object during a dream. However, even though a dream lacks a sensory connection with an object, if we consider the Vedic concept of time as an ever-existing present, given its eternal nature, we realize that the time within which a dream unfolds aligns with the ever-existing present, within which the

present apprehension of an object, as described in the accepted definition of perception, also occurs. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to assert that a dream is exclusively a pseudo-perceptual awareness event merely because it does not involve the immediate apprehension of a present object. With this perspective of perception existing within a Vedic definition of time, characterized as an ever-existing present due to its eternity, we can now delve into Kumāṛila's defense of the Veda as the sole source of knowledge for Dharma while excluding perception, as discussed above.

The second sūtra of the MS establishes that Dharma is a purpose or objective characterized by a directive injunction. Such injunctions typically prescribe that to attain Y, one must perform X, and these performances are typically part of Vedic rituals. Consequently, a Vedic ritual serves as the immediate context within which a Vedic injunction is executed, aiming to achieve a beneficial outcome in the future. In a linear understanding of time, this favorable result will be enjoyed at a time distinct from the present moment when the Vedic ritual occurs. Similarly, within a linear conception of time, the ongoing Vedic ritual in which an injunction is enacted to secure a beneficial future outcome cannot be considered a means of acquiring knowledge about Dharma. This is because past, present, and future divisions remain discrete and unmerged in a linear interpretation of time. Consequently, even the Veda, when viewed through this linear lens, cannot function as a means of comprehending Dharma, as it exclusively involves apprehending objects existing solely in the present moment. This directly contradicts Kumāṛila's assertion that the Veda is the sole method of gaining knowledge about Dharma.

Given Kumāṛila's assertion regarding the eternal nature of the Vedas, we can utilize a Vedic perspective on time, where time is characterized as an ever-existing present due to its eternality, to reconcile Kumāṛila's acceptance of the proposed definition of perception as a valid means of understanding Dharma. It is essential to recognize that if Kumāṛila genuinely upholds the Vedas as eternal, this eternality cannot be correlated with the conventional linear concept of time, which delineates experiences into past, present, and future. Instead, the eternality attributed by Kumāṛila to the Vedas aligns with a Vedic definition of time, where time functions as an ever-existing present. In such a paradigm, the present moment allows for apprehending current and future objects. In this light, the definition of perception, as articulated in the first half of MS 1.1.4, emphasizing the apprehension of an object in the present, can serve as a legitimate means of acquiring knowledge about Dharma. This is feasible because, within the Vedic understanding of time as an ever-existing present, the constraints of past, present, and future are transcended, enabling perception to encompass both present and future objects.

However, one might contend that I am extending the concept of time in this argument. For instance, while it is conceivable that the proposed definition of perception, as articulated in the first half of MS 1.1.4, could potentially align with a valid definition of perception, not all instances of such perception, where there is a connection between a sensory faculty and an object, necessarily occur within the context of a Vedic ritual. Hence, even if we consider a hypothetical Vedic definition of time where time functions as an ever-existing present, it may not be sufficient to interpret perception in these external scenarios accurately. This is a valid objection to consider. In light of this objection, it is

worth recalling an insightful remark made by Patil in class, which emphasized the question: "Who would act in the present for future results that are not theirs?" To fully grasp this issue, let me elaborate.

To illustrate this point, consider the present context: I am currently writing this paper, intending to achieve a favorable grade in the future. This present action of mine does not occur within the framework of a Vedic ritual, yet it operates based on the principle that if I produce a well-crafted paper, I will receive a good grade. Even if we set aside the concept of Vedic time, which some might find implausible, my present effort still allows me to anticipate a positive future outcome. Consequently, it may not be unreasonable to posit that a definition of time characterized as an ever-existing present can adequately account for instances of perception, even beyond the scope of a Vedic ritual and the proposed definition of perception as delineated in the first half of MS 1.1.4.

Consequently, it becomes apparent that a Vedic concept of time as an ever-existing present suggests that perception, as delineated in the first half of MS 1.1.4, validly comprehends Dharma. This is possible because perception, which involves the apprehension of a present object, can also anticipate and apprehend a future advantageous outcome of Dharma. This unique capability is underpinned by the concept of the eternal nature of the Vedas, a belief that Kumārila himself upholds.

## Works Cited

Taber, John A., and Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa. *A Hindu Critique of Buddhist Epistemology: Kumāriḷa on Perception: the "Determination of Perception" Chapter of Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa's Ślokavārttika*. Routledge Curzon, 2005.