Distinguishing Deities:  
A Contextual Analysis in Mīmāṃsā  

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"How many angels can dance on the point of a very fine needle, without jostling one another?"¹ This is a famous saying that makes fun of Thomas Aquinas's disquisition on whether several angels, given that they did not have material bodies, could exist in the same place at the same time. Also in the Mīmāṃsā, deities (devatās) were held to be beings without material bodies, like angels in Christianity. With regard to the method of distinguishing between two deities, the scholars of Mīmāṃsā advanced arguments as complicated as the scholastic discussion on angels in medieval Christianity.

1. The first chapter of the second volume of the Mīmāṃsāsūtra (MmS) classifies the ritual actions constituting a sacrifice into primary and secondary. The third section formulates the following principle: secondary ritual actions are those that process materials into finished goods to be used in a sacrifice, for example, a series of action for cooking oblations, while primary ones are those that do not process materials, for example, the offering of an oblation into the sacrificial fire. The two subsequent sections present exceptions to this principle. The fourth section cites examples of a secondary ritual action that does not process materials, for example, the revolving motion of a firebrand around something for purifying the latter. The fifth section deals with a primary ritual action by which one does not offer an oblation into the sacrificial fire. The example discussed in this section is stotra, that is, the chanting of hymns by three Sāmaveda priests, and śastra, that is, the recitation of hymns by one of the Rgveda priests. In the Jyotiṣṭoma sacrifice, these two together constitute the session that precedes the offering of a draught of soma into the sacrificial fire by Yajurveda priests.

The opponent in this section insists that stotra and śastra are not primary but secondary because they are considered to be included in the preparatory actions (sanskāra) pertaining to deities. In order to rationalize Vedic sacrifices, the Mīmāṃsā school attempted to play down the role of incantation as much as possible. For that purpose, they maintain that
the purpose of muttering a *yajus* formula by a Yajurveda priest along with each of his ritual actions is to illuminate (*prakāśana*), that is, to make one clearly conscious of, the object to be handled in the action. ²) On the analogy of this role assigned for a *yajus* formula, the opponent explains that the performance of *stotra* and *śastra* in the Jyotiṣṭoma, also makes one clearly conscious of the deity to whom one is about to offer a draught of *soma*.

In MmS 2.1.14, the proponent rejects this view arguing that if that were the case, then, taking into consideration the purpose (*arthena*) of their utterance, one would have to eliminate (*apakāśyata*) a particular *stotra* and *śastra*. In their commentaries on this *sūtra*, both Śabara and Kumārila explain that there is a session in the Jyotiṣṭoma in which the *stotra* chanted by the Sāmaveda priests praises a deity different from one for whom the Yajurveda priest is about to perform the rite of offering. In this case, the opponent would have to eliminate the *stotra* in this session and remove it to another session in which a draught of *soma* is offered to the very deity it praises. ³) But in fact, the *stotra* is a primary ritual that contributes to bringing about the result of sacrifice. Therefore, there is no reason to remove it in spite of the difference of deities.

2. The instance where the Yajurveda and the Sāmaveda do not agree with each other about the deity to be praised in a particular session is as follows. In the second midday session of the Jyotiṣṭoma, the Adhvaryu, the chief priest of the Yajurveda, first fills a cup called *śukra* with *soma*. Then, the three Sāmaveda priests perform the chant called the first *prṣṭhastotra*. Then the Hotṛ, the chief priest of the Ṛgveda, performs the recitation called the first *niṣkevalyaśastra*; thereafter the Adhvaryu offers a draught of *soma* to a deity called Mahendra, and, finally, they drink the remnant of the *soma*. ⁴)

As far as the Yajurveda is concerned, all the relevant Śrautasūtras, that is, Baudhāṣṭya 8.8: 243,14–20, Āpśa 13.8.4, Māṇiśa 2.4.6.17 and Kātyāṣṭra 10.3.10, call the draught of *soma* to be offered in this session *mahāṃḥindro ya ojasā,* the beginning of RV 8.6.1 employed in TS 1.4.20, whereas the Māṇiśa quotes *mahāṃḥ indroḥ nṛvad,* the beginning of RV 6.19.1 employed in MS 1.3.25. The Kātyāṣṭra quotes only the *mahāṃḥ indraḥ* common to these two beginnings. Moreover, these two RV verses are quoted together in the *mantra* sections of all Yajurvedasamhitās, namely, TS 1.4.20–21, MS 1.3.24–25, KS 4.8, KpS 3.6, and VS 7.39–40.

In the first *prṣṭhastotra*, on the other hand, the Sāmaveda priests chant one of the two sets of RV hymns, one to the melody of *rathamārtarasāman* and another to the melody of

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byḥatsāman. RV 7.32.22–23 is quoted in SV 2.1.1.11, to be chanted with rathamta-ra-
sāman, while RV 6.46.1–2 is quoted in SV 2.2.1.12, to be chanted with byḥatsāman. All
these four hymns, however, call Indra using the name in the vocative without qualifying
him with “mahat.” Thus, in the Yajurveda, both the mantras and the injunctions refer to
Mahendra, while, in the Sāmaveda, the mantras refer to Indra without the qualification of
greatness (mahattva). Then, if Indra and Mahendra were proved to be different deities,
one would have to admit that the Yajurveda and the Sāmaveda differ regarding the deity to
be praised in the second midday session. Then, if one follows the view of the opponent
who insists that the performance of stotra makes one conscious of the deities to be praised
by the offering, one would have to remove the first pṛṣṭhasotra from this session for
Mahendra to one of the other sessions for Indra, 6)
3. The proponent’s argument that Mahendra is a unique deity different from Indra might
sound very peculiar. 7) Resorting to common sense, the opponent in Śabara’s commentary
maintains that there is no necessity to remove the first pṛṣṭhasotra from the session for
Mahendra because Mahendra is nothing but “the great Indra,” namely, Indra qualified as
“great” (mahat) (ŚBh 417,6–8). However, analyzing the word “māhendra,” the name of
the soma draught at issue, into the stem “mahendra” and the Taddhita suffix āY, 8) Śabara
argues that if the deity denoted by “mahendra” were “the great Indra,” then “māhendra”
would lose the unity of a whole word. This is because it is impossible for the name “indra”
to be either equipped with the suffix āY in expectation of “mahat,” or compounded with
“mahat” in expectation of the suffix āY (ŚBh 418,1–2). In other words, one would not be
able to determine whether the name “indra” is primarily related to the adjective “mahat” or
to the suffix āY. Concerning the meaning of the components of “māhendra,” also, the deity
Indra could not afford to receive a draught of soma and, at the same time, to be qualified as
great (ŚBh 418,2–3). Therefore, Śabara concludes, the word “mahendra” is meaningful
only in its whole stem (prātipadika), but not in the combination of its components. As a
result, it refers to a unique deity different from Indra (ŚBh 419,7–9).
4. As usual, Kumārila does not refrain from disclosing flaws in Śabara’s proof. If the word
“mahendra” in the “māhendra” were a proper name, then “agniṣoma” in “agniṣomīya,”
too, would have to be the proper name of a single deity (TV 420,10–11). However, there
is no difficulty in analyzing “agniṣomīya” into “agni,” “soma,” and the suffix “āY,” by
considering “agniṣomīya” to mean a sacrifice in which one offers oblation to a pair of deis-
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According to Kumārila it is grammatically justifiable to analyze the word "māhendra" into the adjective "mahat," the noun "indra," and the suffix āN, even though such an analysis is not attested in the Veda (TV 421,20–30). As evidence, he quotes a grammatical rule formulated by Patañjali in his Mahābhāṣya—that the primary member can be compounded with the secondary member even if it requires an outside word. Criticizing Śabara for failing to prove his argument with the help of the science of grammar, Kumārila unhesitatingly declares the argument of the opponent as more excellent (sobhana) than Śabara's, and maintains that it is therefore necessary to apply methodology other than grammatical analysis to prove the proponent's argument (TV 422,19–20).

In his own criticism of the opponent's view, Kumārila first stresses the Māṁsā view that deities belong to the group of beings constituted by nothing more than words. Māṁsā holds that deities do not have material bodies. Therefore, they are imperceptible. Hence, to decide whether the two deities under consideration are the same, we have no means at our disposal other than interpreting the relevant passage of the Veda (TV 423,1–2). Thus, when we find Indra qualified in a passage of the Veda, we have to accept the qualified Indra as different from the mere Indra if, in the context of that particular passage, this qualification is indispensable. In contrast to Śabara, Kumārila accepts that the word "mahendra" is a compound that consists of the adjective "mahat" and the name "indra." Taking this grammatical analysis for granted, however, Kumārila attempts to prove the proponent's argument by adopting a linguistic analysis different from that employed in the science of grammar. To begin with, resorting to the Māṁsā principle that an injunction (vidhi) is more important than the mantra accompanying it in the Vedic corpus, he maintains that in each session of the Jyotisṭoma, an injunction designates a particular deity as the deity to be praised (TV 422,23–24). Comparing the passages about the second midday session in the Sāmaveda with those in the Yajurveda, he finds that the Yajurveda calls the deity to be praised in this session Mahendra, not only in its mantra but also in its injunction. Thereafter, he argues (as follows) that the qualification of Indra by greatness is indispensable in this injunction.

5. Generally speaking, the Māṁsā holds a statement to have dual function: a statement refers to something already known in its context as its topic (uddeśa), while it supplies new information as a comment (upādeya) about that topic. In other words, it reveals what
is enjoined (vidheya) in an injunction.\textsuperscript{12}

In the present case, if one assumes that the topic of the injunction were Indra, already brought into the Jyotistoma by the Vedic corpus, the present injunction would merely comment that one should offer a draught of soma to him in the second midday session. In that case, even if Indra were called “mahendra” in this injunction, the qualification would “not be intended.”\textsuperscript{13} Kumäriya explains the non-intentionality of a qualification in a statement by way of analogy with an ordinary injunction, “Bring here this man, wearing white clothes!” (yo ṣuklavāsās tam ānaya).\textsuperscript{14} With these words, a police captain may command his men to arrest a person recorded in a list of suspects, having found him wearing white clothes. The topic of this injunction is a single male person referred to deictically by the demonstrative pronoun “ayam.” Regarding the police’s desired action with respect to him, this injunction directs them to fetch him. Thus, the qualification “wearing white clothes” (ṣuklavāsā), inserted between the topic “yo ṣam” and the comment “tam ānaya” in the Sanskrit sentence, is no more than a description given after the person to be fetched has been deictically indicated. Accordingly, even if that person takes off his white clothes in protest against his arrest, he remains to be the same person to be fetched.

However, the topic of the present injunction is the draught of soma in the second midday session, and the injunction answers the question, who is the deity that receives that draught. Here, the greatness (mahattva) is indispensable for the designation of a deity to be praised for the first time. If his greatness is left out of consideration, Indra ceases to be the deity to be praised here, and therefore Indra’s greatness is the “intended qualification” (vivaksitaguna) contained in the new information to be known through this injunction.\textsuperscript{15} Kumäriya explains the intentionality of this qualification by way of analogy with another ordinary injunction, “One who is wearing white clothes is to be provided with meals” (ṣuklavāsā bhojavitavyah) (TV 423, 12). The topic of this injunction is the provision of meals, and this injunction answers the question, what kind of persons one should provide with meals. Here, the qualification “wearing white clothes,” though the same as that in the previous example, restricts (viṣesana) the persons who are entitled to receive meals. Thus, if someone who was wearing white clothes happened to take them off before the injunction was declared, he would not receive meals. In the same way, because Indra’s qualification by greatness is indispensable for the present injunction, one should distinguish the deity to be praised in this session from mere Indra, and call him Mahendra.
As an example of the injunction in which an adjective is inseparable from a noun, Kumārila quotes “the red-turbaned priests move forwards” (lohitosniśa ātvijah praracant) from the chapter of a sacrifice for malediction called “śyena” in a Brāhmaṇa of the Sāmaveda, Saḍvimśabrāhmana 4.2.22 (TV 423,12–13). According to the Mimāṃsā rule of interpretation given in the MmS 3.8.12, this injunction lays down that all priests who take part in the Śyena sacrifice should wear red turbans, and this costume is not restricted to Sāmaveda priests although this injunction occurs only in a Sāmaveda Brāhmaṇa.  

**Conclusion** In the Mimāṃsā disquisition on whether Mahendra is the same deity as Indra or a different deity, we find competitive attitude at two levels: First, the Mimāṃsā school supports the Yajurveda against the Sāmaveda in a case in which the two Vedas differ. Because the Yajurveda determines Mahendra as the deity to be praised at the second midday session of the Jyotiṣṭoma, one might consider the first prṣṭhasotra that praises Indra without qualifying him as “great” (mahat) does not occur in its proper place in the Sāmaveda. However, as regards the chant by the Sāmaveda priests and the recitation by the Ṛgveda priests in the Jyotiṣtoma, Mimāṃsakas do not consider them to be performed as auxiliary ritual for making one conscious of the deity who receives the soma. For that reason, Mimāṃsakas permit the Sāmaveda priests to chant the stotra praising Indra when the Yajurveda priest offers a draught of soma to Mahendra. Here we find a tendency in the Mimāṃsā to be in favor of the Yajurveda, despite approving the Sāmavedin’s participation in the primary rituals that contribute to bringing about the desired result.

Second, notwithstanding his great respect for the science of grammar, Kumārila demonstrates that the Mimāṃsā has a different and unique methodology. In order to prove that Mahendra is a deity different from Indra, Śabara claimed that it is impossible to analyze the word “māhendra” into “mahat,” “indra” and the Taddhita suffix āṇ. Kumārila, however, vehemently criticizes Śabara’s grammatical explanation, and acknowledges that the position of the proponent cannot be proved by means of grammatical analysis because the latter is concerned only with the inner structure of a word. Instead, from the viewpoint of pragmatic linguistics, he pays attention to the contextual difference, whether a word in a statement takes part in conveying new information. For all that, this is a traditional Mimāṃsā exegetics—analyzing a statement into two parts, one that refers to a topic already known, and another that supplies new information as a comment on the topic. Even Śabara, albeit slightly, proposes to investigate the problem discussed in the present section by means of a
contextual analysis. 18) 

2) Cf. TV 150,14–16 on MmS 1.2.32. 
3) Cf. SBh 416,10–12; TV 416,26–28. 
5) In the niśkevalyaśastra, the Ṣat recites RV 7.32.22–23, 8.3.7–8, 10.74.6, 8.3.1–2 and 1.32.1–15 when following the prṣṭhastotra chanted in the rathamtarasāman, whereas he recites RV 6.46.1–2, 8.61.7–8, 10.74.6, 8.61.1–2 and 1.32.1–15 (according to ŚāṅkhŚŚ 7.20.9: RV 6.18.1–15) when following that the byhasāman (cf. ĀśŚŚ 5.15; ŚāṅkhŚŚ 7.20). In these hymns, too, Indra is not qualified as “mahān.” However, RV 1.32, the main hymn, extols Indra’s killing of Vṛṣṭa, and TS 6.5.5.3 and ŚB 4.3.3.17 explain that Indra has come to be praised as mahendra on account of this great achievement. For Śābara’s comment on this point, see SBh 419,10–12. 
6) Śābara understands well the context of the present example: After having declared that this section deals with stotra and śastra, and having illustrated śastra by praūga and niśkevalya, and stotra by āyya and prṣṭha (SBh 415.7–8), he precisely quotes the beginning of RV 7.32.22, “abhī tvā śūra,” as an example of the paired hymns for Indra (aṁdraḥ pragāhaḥ) transmitted in the SV in the context of the offering of soma to Mahendra (SBh 417.1–3). 
7) In TS 2.5.4.4–5, those entitled to offer sāmnāya to Mahendra instead of Indra at the new moon sacrifice constitute a restricted set of “prosperous ones” (gatāśṛi)—graduates (śuṣravās), village chiefs (grāmaṇī) or royal personages (rājanyā). However, the ŚB abolishes the restriction on the offering of sāmnāya (1.6.4.10–11) and does not distinguish Mahendra from Indra (1.6.4.21). Nishimura Naoko 西村直子 found this discrepancy between the TS and ŚB in her work, Hōboku to shūtikusa-gari 放牧と敷き草刈り (Sendai: Tōhoku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2006), 137; 149–151. 
8) Cf. A.6.3.46; 6.4.148; 4.2.29. 
9) Both in the Mīmāṃsā rules of exegetics (TV 420,15–19) and in the Vedic scriptures (TV 420, 20) the offering to a pair of deities is taken for granted. In his commentary on MmS 10.4.42, Śābara himself acknowledges that Agni and Soma are the deities to be praised in the āgniṣomiya sacrifice (TV 420,20–21). Pāṇini, too, illustrates the coordinative compounds for deities (devatādvandva) by “āgniṣomau” (TV 420,22–25; cf. A.6.3.27 & 8.3.82). 
10) TV 422.4–6: atha vā “bhavati ca pradhānaśya sāpekṣasyāpyi samāsa” (VMBh, I, p. 360,21–22; p. 367.8–9; p. 368.23–24.) iti yady apindraśabdas taddhiāpekṣas tathāpi mahattvaṁ prati prādhānyāl labhate samāsam, “Or, because [it is established in the Mahābhāṣya that] a compound occurs even if the primary member requires [an outside word], the word ‘indra’ forms a compound [with the subordinate member ‘mahat’] on account of its priority over the greatness, although it requires a Taddhita-suffix.” 
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13) TV 423,10: yadi hi taddhitasambandhe devatoddīṣiyamāna syāt tato ‘syā guṇāvivakṣā bhavet, “If [in the injunction] the deity [, i.e., Indra] were referred to as a topic in its relation to the Taddhita-suffix (āṇ), then it would not be intended that the deity has [greatness as] a quality.”

14) TV 423,13–14: yadā te ‘py uddīṣyante “yo ‘yam śūklavāsas tam ānaya” ityādau tadā vināpi više-ṣaṇenāṇīyante. “But with reference to such (injunctions) as ‘Bring here this man, who wears white clothes,’ in which those [who are indicated by ‘this man’] are referred to as a topic, they are still to be fetched even if they lack the qualification [by wearing white clothes].”

15) TV 423,10–12: iyaṃ punar avidhiyamāna devatātvam eva na pratipadyata ity avaṣyopādatavyā. tataḥ ca vivakṣitagnatvāt tadāpāye na kathāṃcid devateti gamyate. “However, this (deity, i.e., Mahendra) would not have the character as a deity insofar as it is not enjoined. It [, i.e., this deity] should, therefore, necessarily be taken to be a comment [in this injunction]. Accordingly, because [the greatness] is an intended quality [in this injunction], it is realized that [Indra] would never be the deity unless he has that (quality)”; TV 423,15–16: yadābhidhānopakāriṇī vidhigatayatirikbhidhānabhi-hītā naiva pratyabhiṇāyate saiveyam devateti. “Inasmuch as [a deity] contributes [to the sacrifice] in its verbal form, one would never recall that it is the very deity [to be praised] if it were denoted by a name different from that laid down in the injunction.”

16) Cf. TV 1117,20 on MmS 3.8.12.

17) In MmS 3.3.10, it is openly argued that the RV and the SV are subordinate to the Yajurveda with regard to the Jyotiṣṭoma.

18) ŚBh 419,3–4: na cāyam indraśabdo ‘vihitavat svārtham taddhitārthena sambadhyaeta, vihitavac ca parārtham mahattvena saṃbaddhāṃ antūdyaeta. “Moreover, one and the same word ‘indra’ cannot be that which has already been enjoined and that which has not been enjoined yet; in other words, it would not be connected with the Taddhita-suffix (āṇ) for the sake of its own predication, and at the same time, it would not be reiterated [as the topic] to be connected with greatness for the sake of the predication of something else.”

〈Abbreviations and Literature〉

A Aṣṭādhyaī.


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KpS  

KS  

MānŚS  

MmS  
\textit{Mimāṃsāśūtra. See ŚBh.}

MS  

PB  

RV  

ŚānkŚŚ  

ŚB  

ŚB  

ŚBh  

SV  

TS  

TV  
\textit{Tantravārttika. See ŚBh.}

VMBh  

VS  

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