CHAPTER FOUR

HERMENEUTICS OF SACRIFICE

4.1. INTRODUCTION

4.1.1. The Role of Mīmāṃsā in Indian Hermeneutics

Indian philosophical schools have tended, throughout their history, to acquire a systematic character and ultimately to deal with all acknowledged philosophical topics. Nonetheless, each school has usually emerged out of a specific concern, such as natural philosophy in the case of Vaiśeṣika, debate in the case of Nyāya, or Vedic exegesis in the case of Mīmāṃsā. For this reason, the Mīmāṃsā School has served as a reservoir for exegetic rules, making it possibly the main source for the Indian approach to hermeneutics in general. It is, for instance, well-known that Mīmāṃsā provided Indian jurisprudence hermeneutical rules and principles (see Sarkar 1909) and the same sort of influence can also be seen within Vedānta schools, where Mīmāṃsā rules, adjusted to the Vedānta view of the Veda or other Sacred Texts, were also applied.

Thus, although the hermeneutics of sacrificial prescriptions may appear to be of only indirect philosophical interest, understanding the exegetical habits of Mīmāṃsā writers along with their practical application to concrete Vedic texts is essential to the understanding of Indian hermeneutics in general.¹

4.1.2. The Role of Hermeneutics in Mīmāṃsā: Shaping the Chaos

The Mīmāṃsā School developed primarily out of Vedic exegesis, and hermeneutics remained the school’s main concern throughout its history. The intent of this concern was first to make sense of Vedic passages and then, above all, to build coherent textual units out of the mass of these texts. Furthermore, since the Veda was believed by Mīmāṃsakas to be faultless and independent of any author, Mīmāṃsā thinkers felt compelled to

¹ Some of the material used for § 4.1.1 to § 4.4.2 has already been discussed in Freschi 2008b.
elaborate rules in order to eliminate seeming fallacies and to understand the Vedic texts without relying on an author’s intent (tātparya), i.e., to interpret the texts as if they were totally autonomous. As stated by Pārthasārathi Miśra:

How could a faulty cognition arise out of a non-faulty instrument (such being the case of the Veda, which cannot possibly be mistaken, since error originates out of external causes, and the Veda lacks any cause altogether)? [...] Although no intrinsic mistake can possibly be found with regard to the Veda, which is authorless, an erroneous cognition may nevertheless arise through [the application of] rules that seem to be correct on the part of the knower alone, because his mind is bereft of a universal [rule] and [hence he] does not determine exceptions. Therefore, the Mimāṃsā system gains significance since it aims at determining the [correct] rules.²

The guiding line in these attempts is always a prescription. In fact, according to Mimāṃsakas, only Vedic prescriptions convey knowledge independently; non-prescriptive portions of the Veda are only auxiliary to the prescriptive portions. Mimāṃsakas, by collecting and using segments scattered throughout Vedic literature (especially from the Brāhmaṇas), build coherent units of text around a prescription.

Mimāṃsā hermeneutics developed from the hermeneutics of the Śrautasūtras. In both cases, although less so in the Śrautasūtra case, one rarely finds a systematic description of rituals that is designed to guide their performance. In fact, as shown by Daya Krishna (2001), it is possible for actual performers of rituals to disregard Mimāṃsā solutions. Systematic descriptions are rather the subject matter of ritual manuals, called prayoga or paddhati.

By contrast, the basic intention of the Śrautasūtras is to provide a systematic overview of rituals according to “scientific” principles, i.e., Śrautasūtras aim at clarifying these rituals using as few rules as possible. Just as the grammatical sūtras of Pāṇini are not meant to teach a language but rather to disclose the rules one is already acquainted with unconsciously, the ritual sūtras were devised in order to provide the key rules from which an entire ritual procedure can be deduced. A certain instruction mentioned in the

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² katham punar adustena karanena mithyajñanam janyate? [...] yady api asav apaurusseyasya vedasya na svagatah kascid doso vidyate tathapi pratipattur eva samanyapahṛta-buddhivād apavādānirāpaṇac ca nayābhāsebhyaḥ prasaraṇaḥ mithyajñanam jayate. ata eva nyāyānirāpaṇaḥ tathātāṃ samānyamātraśayam arthavād bhavati. (AN IV, adhīyāya x, ad 16, in NR, p. 286) I would like to thank Kei Kataoka for having helped me to understand the meaning of samanyapahṛtabuddhivāt by pointing to an earlier passage, namely, viśeṣādāśāleṣaḥ hi samanyamātraśayam arthavād bhavati. (AN IV, adhīyāya x, ad 14–15, in NR, p. 284)