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DOES THE VEDA HAVE AN AUTHOR?

A reply to Professor Stephen H. Philips

Johannes Bronkhorst, Lausanne

During the IXth World Sanskrit Conference, held in Melbourne in January 1994, Professor Stephen H. PHILLIPS used the time reserved for his paper to virulently attack me personally and a review which I had written of the book *Śabdapramāṇa: Word and Knowledge*, by Puruṣottama BILIMORIA. PHILLIPS' attack has since been published (in a much more measured tone) in *Philosophy East & West* (45.2 1995: 273-279) as a feature review of that same book. Professor Greg BAILEY (one of the organisers of the conference where PHILLIPS read his paper) has asked me to respond to this attack. BAILEY seems to think that the discussion initiated by PHILLIPS could in this way have some theoretical interest. I am not sure whether his expectation will be fulfilled. As I understand it, the difference between PHILLIPS and me is of an altogether different nature.

Most of PHILLIPS' attack consists of general reflections, accompanied by vague allegations, such as: "Bronkhorst's review shows that he is unfamiliar with issues of philosophy", "Bronkhorst seems to have little respect for philosophy as such", "Bronkhorst does not know what he is talking about". This does not of course help much to find out what exactly in my review he finds fault with. However, on a few occasions he criticises my exact words. Let us consider these specific criticisms. Obviously, only these could conceivably constitute the basis for a constructive discussion.

Unfortunately most of what PHILLIPS writes about my actual words is sadly besides the point. One of the passages which provoked PHILLIPS' ire reads as follows (JB p. 103):

Take the fundamental dogma of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta, according to which the Veda has no author, be he human or divine. Bilimoria finds this claim 'preposterous' (p. 19), and proposes a way "to make sense of this sort of a talk about 'text without an author'", viz., "to look upon it as an ontological claim, not about language, but about the *truths* conveyed through language" (p. 21).

PHILLIPS comments as follows (SP p. 274):

According to Bronkhorst (p. 103), Bilimoria finds the claim that the Veda has no author (*apauruṣeya*) "preposterous". But in fact what Bilimoria says is, "This [the doctrine of *apauruṣeya*] appears, on the face of it, to be a preposterous claim"

(p. 19). Surely, *apauruṣeya* does seem to be, *prima facie*, or at first blush, a preposterous claim. In fact, Bilimoria comes around not so much to defending *apauruṣeya* but to using it as a “methodological device for the possibility of *understanding śruti*” (p. 21), a step on a ladder to appreciating Vedāntin and Mīmāṃsaka views and, beyond that, a veritable defense of *śabda-pramāṇa* Thus Bronkhorst’s representation is, in *its* face, outrageous, given what Bilimoria actually says.

This passage confirms the impression which I derived from *Śabdapramāṇa*, namely, that the claim that the Veda has no author is unacceptable, to BILIMORIA, but also, it seems, to PHILLIPS. It can only be accepted, according to BILIMORIA, if one understands it to mean that the *truths* conveyed through language (the Veda?) have no author. The claim that the Veda itself has no author “appears, on the face of it, to be a preposterous claim”, and, unless I misunderstand both BILIMORIA and PHILLIPS, is indeed preposterous according to both of them, at least in this literal form. This is what I read in BILIMORIA’s book, and again in PHILLIPS’ review. But whether or not I understand these two authors correctly here, the main issue is left untouched by PHILLIPS. What I protested against is that BILIMORIA imputes a different interpretation to an established doctrine of Mīmāṃsā. PHILLIPS does not comment upon this, but chooses rather to make a fuss around the word ‘preposterous’. This against the background that BILIMORIA (and he himself) agree that the claim that the Veda has no author is incorrect.

The above passage illustrates how PHILLIPS fusses about individual words, without addressing the issue at stake. The following passage shows this even more clearly. Let me first cite my own words (JB p. 103-04):

It is of course not possible to reject (or rather, reinterpret) a dogma as central as that of the *apauruṣeyatva* of the Veda without inflicting damage to other aspects of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta thought. The very presence of an authoritative body of texts without author induced the Mīmāṃsakas and the Vedāntins to accept that words by themselves – not spoiled by an unreliable or ignorant author, or by some other defect – constitute a means of valid cognition. This so-called *svataḥpramāṇya* guarantees the validity of the words of the Veda, precisely because they have no author. Moreover, because they deal with invisible things, they cannot conflict with any other means of valid cognition.

PHILLIPS comments (SP p. 274):

Bronkhorst ... says, “The very presence of an authoritative body of texts without author induced the Mīmāṃsakas and the Vedāntins to accept that words by themselves – not spoiled by an unreliable or ignorant author, or by some other defect –

constitute a means of valid cognition. This so-called *svataḥprāmānya* guarantees the validity of the words of the Veda, precisely because they have no author.” Note Bronkhorst’s expression “precisely because”. His next sentence also contains a “because” (“Moreover, because they [the words of the Veda] deal with invisible things, they cannot conflict with any other means of valid cognition”), so I guess it is not *precisely*, or only, because of *apauruṣeya* that the Veda is to be regarded as having *svataḥprāmānya* (but also because the Veda deals with invisible things).

It is probably kindest to Professor PHILLIPS to assume that he, while writing this passage, confused English and Sanskrit syntax. It is true that the word “because” occurs twice, but in two different sentences, which present the causes of two different things altogether: 1) the words of the Veda are valid, *because* they have no author; and 2) the words of the Veda cannot conflict with any other means of valid cognition, *because* they deal with invisible things. I find it somewhat alarming that I have to explain these simple sentences to someone who professionally works with texts, even though not perhaps primarily as a philologist but as a philosopher. More important is that PHILLIPS, here again, attacks some words used in my review, without addressing the issue at stake. Does he feel critical towards my review because of my use of words? Or is there a more substantial reason behind his grudge?

PHILLIPS describes the difference between us on the first page of his review (SP p. 273):

[A] main concern of mine is the question of how it is possible for Bronkhorst and myself to have such different reactions, and appraisals, of Bilimoria’s book. The gap in our responses may have to do with opposition between the goals and methods of Indology, on the one hand, and the nature of philosophical engagement, on the other. I hope not. The two disciplines should be complementary, not antagonistic. I shall present reflections on this possible opposition, and in the process what I think about Bilimoria’s book will become clear.

It is indisputable that there are, broadly, the two distinct scholarly approaches to Sanskrit philosophical texts that we group as the Indological, which is philological and historical in orientation, and the philosophical, which is, at bottom, evaluative. There are, accordingly, two groups of scholars: professors of Indology and a motley crew of philosophers working on classical Sanskrit texts. Indological readings are attuned to questions of intellectual history, aimed toward an understanding of the Sanskrit text or texts within the relevant history of ideas and, sometimes, within a broader cultural context. Philosophical readings aim at evaluation, the deciding of what we should believe about specified topics and why – normally the very topics addressed by the Sanskrit text being studied. The philosophic approach makes the text party to contemporary philosophic discussions; the

Indological approach typically does not. Bronkhorst's worst mistake appears to be a failure to appreciate the evaluative engagement in Bilimoria's writing.

Contrary to what PHILLIPS thinks, I have no difficulty with the evaluative approach to Sanskrit philosophical texts. In the case of the idea that the Veda has no beginning and no author there will indeed be few readers – not excluding die-hard philologists – who do not make such an assessment. Everyone (except perhaps some very traditional Indians) will agree that “we should not believe it”, to borrow PHILLIPS' words. And the reasons for this rejection are not primarily philosophical. Such an idea does not fit in with the scientific view of the world current today. We now believe that human beings were not always around, and nor was the universe. A continuous tradition of Vedic recitation is, for us, confronted with questions like the following: Was there Vedic recitation before there were human beings? or before the Big Bang?

We have seen that also BILIMORIA (and PHILLIPS) do not accept the idea of a literally authorless Veda. Had BILIMORIA stopped here, I would not have hesitated to express my agreement. But he did not stop here. He does not simply evaluate, he *reinterprets*. To repeat the words cited in my review: he proposes a way “to make sense of this sort of a talk about ‘text without an author’”, viz., “to look upon it as an ontological claim, not about language, but about the *truths* conveyed through language”. Nowhere in his review does PHILLIPS hint at this crucial dimension of BILIMORIA's “evaluation”. Quite on the contrary, he maintains (SP p. 275): “In accordance with the properly philosophic task of evaluation, BILIMORIA finds merit and faults with a wide range of classical Indian epistemology, but he has not, contra Bronkhorst, tried to adjust or reinterpret to meet modern tastes.” If PHILLIPS is right, BILIMORIA thinks that the Sanskrit authors he studies considered the talk about “text without an author” as an ontological claim about the truths conveyed through language. And PHILLIPS, too, seems to accept this position, or at the very least he considers it a position worth considering.

I have found this position profoundly puzzling from the moment I first came across it in BILIMORIA's book. I failed to see what could possibly have led BILIMORIA into accepting it. However, it seems that I have meanwhile reached some degree of understanding in this regard. It now seems clear to me that BILIMORIA (and PHILLIPS?) reject the classical Mīmāṃsā position according to which the Veda is eternal and without

beginning, and find themselves as a result confronted with the problem to which they try to find a solution. Let me explain.

The general (and in my opinion correct) understanding of the Mīmāṃsā position is that the Veda literally has no beginning: just as every present-day teacher of Vedic recitation has learned his skills from a teacher, so every teacher in the past had a teacher who taught him. There is no beginning to this tradition of recitation, there never was a first reciter (or teacher), and consequently, there was no “author” of the Veda either. This view is peculiar from a modern Western perspective, but it is coherent, and by no means preposterous. Seen in this way, the Veda is literally eternal, i.e., without beginning, and literally without author.

I suspect that BILIMORIA (and PHILLIPS) do not think that the Mīmāṃsā position was like this. They seem to believe – or take for granted – that the Mīmāṃsakas accepted that the Veda had a beginning in time. But of course, if one accepts that the Veda had a beginning in time, the claim that it had no author becomes highly peculiar, or indeed preposterous. Someone must, on that assumption, have recited, or thought of, the text of the Veda for the first time. Why not call him the author? On this understanding of the Mīmāṃsā position it becomes understandable that BILIMORIA starts trying “to make sense of this sort of a talk about ‘text without an author’”.

Is this really the way BILIMORIA understands the Mīmāṃsā position? Unfortunately his writings (or at least the writings to which I have had access) are not at all clear about this issue. They often seem to take for granted that the Veda must have had a beginning, but they rarely reject in so many words the opposite view, according to which the Veda had no beginning in time. However, BILIMORIA does discuss a number of times the term *autpattika*, which occurs in Mīmāṃsā Sūtra 1.1.5: *autpattikas tu śabdasyārthena sambandhaḥ* “The relation between word and meaning is *autpattika*”. Śābara explains this term to mean *nitya*, which normally means “eternal”, but not here, according to BILIMORIA (1989: 159; cp. 1994: 190; 1995: 142 f.):

Nitya has the more general connotation of “eternity”, “outside time”, “beginningless” and so on But here the term “*nitya*”, as Biardeau rightly points out, “does not connote eternity nor does it even specifically refer to permanence”; rather it has the sense of an “internal exigency” (*svābhāvika*).

One may or may not agree with BILIMORIA's understanding of the words *autpattika* and *nitya*. But even if one agrees with him that *nitya* does not here mean "eternal", does this imply that the Veda is not eternal, i.e. beginningless, either? BILIMORIA seems to take this for granted, for he takes this observation about the relation of words and their meanings as point of departure for explaining in his own special way how the Mīmāṃsaka could look upon the Veda as being *apauruṣeya*, without author.

I assume that everyone (including BILIMORIA and PHILLIPS) would agree that BILIMORIA's attempts to explain what is meant by authorlessness are besides the point, if only it can be shown that the Mīmāṃsakas, at least from Śābara onward, really believed that the Veda literally had no beginning. If the Veda has been handed down from (literally) beginningless time, there is obviously no place for an author, for an author must stand at the beginning of his work, which we now assume never to have existed. Is it possible to prove that the Mīmāṃsakas looked upon the Veda as literally beginningless?

Sheldon POLLOCK (1989: 607-608) has recently pointed out that basically two arguments are presented by the Mīmāṃsakas in support of the *apauruṣeyatva* of the Veda. Empirical grounds are supposed to show that the recitation of the Veda must be beginningless. The second argument POLLOCK describes as follows: "The transcendent character of the Vedas, which is proved by the fact of their having no beginning in time and no author, is confirmed by their contents: the Vedas show no dimension whatever of historical referentiality. Allusions to historical persons or to historical sequentiality are only apparently so." He gives the following example from the Śābara Bhāṣya: "[T]he Vedic sentence 'Babara Prāvāhaṇi [son of Pravāha[ṇa]] once desired ...' ... – which might establish a *terminus post quem* for the composition of the text (i.e., after Pravāha[ṇa] begot Babara) – contains merely phonemic resemblances to the names of historical persons 'Etymological' analysis shows that the references are in fact to eternally existing entities (in the case in question, to the 'howling wind')."

I have discussed this and other similar examples in another publication (Bronkhorst 1997). They prove beyond doubt that the Veda, as seen by Śābara, had (literally) no beginning and therefore (literally) no author. Interestingly, BILIMORIA shows some awareness of this point of view in the case of later Mīmāṃsā authors (BILIMORIA 1989: 160): "We should explain, however, that in later Mīmāṃsā thinking, Śābara's use of '*nitya*' in the context of *autpattika* was taken literally to mean 'eternal' Thus

Pārthasārathi Miśra, here following Kumārila, takes the relation of *śabda* and *artha* to be inexorably invariant, permanent, even eternal. And he argues that since the relation between word and meaning is eternal, we cannot be in error with Vedic sentences, as we might with ordinary utterances where conventions have so altered the otherwise fixed meanings with their respective words. That is why the ordinary utterance is not an inerrant means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), unless it comes from a trustworthy person.”¹ (I would like to add, *pace* PHILLIPS, that the words of the Veda are valid, *precisely because* they have no author.)

BILIMORIA’s discussion has a tendency to shift back and forth between the Veda and language in general. In the passage just cited he points out that the classical Mīmāṃsakas took the relation of *śabda* and *artha* to be eternal, without adding that they believed the Veda to be eternal. But they did. The final section of Kumārila’s *Śloka-vārttika*, commented upon by Pārthasārathi Miśra, is called precisely *Vedanīyatādhikaraṇa* “section on the eternality of the Veda”. And Peri Sarveswara SHARMA (1994: 58 f.) has drawn attention to passages from the *Sambandhākṣepaparīkṣā* of the same work that prove its beginninglessness. This belief is crucial. It is not just language, or the relation between words and meanings, that are eternal, but the Veda, this concrete body of texts that was being memorised and recited (and to some extent still is), which was believed to be literally eternal, i.e., without beginning.

In a more recent publication BILIMORIA (1995: 152) refers to POLLOCK’s above-mentioned article, but avoids the crucial issue of the literal beginninglessness of the Veda, or rather: he demonstrates that he is unable to take it seriously. He describes the situation as follows (p. 153):

Indeed, the Mīmāṃsā draws on the very facti[c]ity of forgotten origins of the oral tradition and turns this to its own advantage. Mīmāṃsā argues that as long as it is humanly possible to recollect, there is no knowledge of the authors of the Veda: all we know is that the text was heard by our fathers, our fathers heard it from their fathers and forefathers, and this line of hearing, goes all the way back to the ancients, who also heard them. Thus there is a historically continuous succession of non-authoring “hearers” (*śrotr[i]yas*). This is why the Veda is called *Śruti*, or

1 The last two sentences read like a *non sequitur*, for they suggest that trustworthy persons distinguish themselves primarily by *not* following the “conventions [which] have so altered the otherwise fixed meanings with their respective words”. As important is of course that the trustworthy person is *trustworthy*.

śrautagrantha. It is not self-evident nor is there any real evidence that the Veda began with some one person or group. This indeed is the mystery.

This may indeed be a mystery to BILIMORIA, but the Mīmāṃsakas do not present it as one. They do not merely say that we do not know who the author was, they claim emphatically that there was none.

All this means that BILIMORIA addresses a problem (the “preposterous” assumption of a Veda that has come into being without author) which he has created himself. No one, and certainly not the classical Mīmāṃsakas, believe that the Veda has come into being without an author, for the classical Mīmāṃsakas believed that the Veda has never come into being, for the simple reason that it always was there. But this fact that it always was there excludes the possibility of an author. BILIMORIA’s solution to *his* problem – which involves references to a variety of modern views about language – is therefore of no interest for the study of Mīmāṃsā, because BILIMORIA has fundamentally misunderstood a basic tenet of that school of thought. More precisely, BILIMORIA has not been able to step outside his modern world view and has superimposed upon classical Mīmāṃsā ideas which do not belong to it.

It remains to be pointed out that the Vedānta position is not completely identical with the (Pūrva-)Mīmāṃsā one. Both agree that the Veda is without beginning, to be sure, but the Vedāntins accept that the Veda is newly pronounced at each creation, whereas the Mīmāṃsakas do not believe in such repeated creations. The differences between the two points of view are described in the portion of the Vedāntaparibhāṣā reproduced at the end of BILIMORIA’s book – but not, as far as I can see, discussed in its main body –, so that a simple translation of the relevant passages can here suffice. There we read:²

- 2 BILIMORIA, 1988: 332-33, § 48-49, 53-55 (errors corrected): *vedānām nityatvena nirastasamastapuṇḍūṣanatayā prāmāṇyam ity adhvaramīmāṃsakāḥ / asmākaṃ tu mate vedo na nityaḥ utpattimattvāt / ... / nanu ... utpattimattvena parameśvarakartṛkātayā pauruṣeyatvasiddhau apauruṣeyatvaṃ vedānām iti tavāpi siddhānto bhajyeta / iti cet na / na hi tāvat puruṣeṇa uccāryamāṇatvaṃ pauruṣeyatvaṃ / ... nāpi puruṣādhi-notpattikatvaṃ [pauruṣeyatvaṃ] / ... kimtu sajātīyoccāraṇānapekṣoccāraṇaviṣayatvaṃ pauruṣeyatvaṃ / tathā ca sargādyakāle parameśvaraḥ pūrvasargasiddhavedā-nupūrvīsamānānupūrvīkaṃ vedaṃ viracitavān / na tu tadvijātīyaṃ vedaṃ / iti na sajātīyoccāraṇānapekṣoccāraṇaviṣayatvaṃ pauruṣeyatvaṃ [vedānām] / [mahā] bhāratādīnām tu sajātīyoccāraṇam anapekṣyaivoccāraṇam iti teṣām pauruṣeyatvaṃ /*

The Mīmāṃsakas who occupy themselves with the sacrifice (i.e. the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsakas) maintain that the Vedas are valid because they are eternal and therefore free from all human faults. In our opinion (i.e., that of the Vedāntins), on the other hand, the Veda is not eternal, because it has an origin.

[Objection:] The fact that the Vedas have an origin and have been made by God proves that they have an author; such being the case, your position according to which the Vedas have no author is shown to be incorrect.

[Reply:] Not so, for “having an author” does not, to begin with, mean “being uttered by a person”. Nor does it mean “having an origin that depends on a person”.

To explain: at the beginning of creation God made the Veda in such a way that its composition is identical to the composition of the Veda established during the previous creation, not a different Veda. The Vedas have, as a result, no author in the sense that they are not the object of an utterance that is independent of a similar utterance (made during an earlier creation). The utterance of the Mahābhārata etc., on the other hand, *is* independent of a similar utterance (during an earlier creation), and therefore these texts do have an author. In this way tradition has been defined as being divided into parts that have and those that do not have an author.

Instead of a beginningless tradition of recitation, the Vedānta of the Vedāntaparibhāṣā accepts a beginningless series of creations. In each of these creations the Veda (or the Vedas; the text appears to use both expressions interchangeably) is newly introduced, but in exactly the same form as before. The result is that the Veda may not be eternal (it supposedly does not exist during the periods separating succeeding creations), but it certainly is beginningless and therefore without author.

Back to PHILLIPS. I invite Professor PHILLIPS to first pronounce himself on the question whether the Veda, from the point of view of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta, was literally beginningless or not. If he agrees with me that it was (what else could he do?), I would then like him to explain what is, against that background, so preposterous about the claim that the Veda had no author, and why BILIMORIA needs to invoke the views of various modern thinkers (among them HUSSERL, DE SAUSSURE, GADAMER, DERRIDA) in order to solve a non-problem. I also urge him to explain, or withdraw, his statement (SP p. 275) to the effect that BILIMORIA “has not ... tried to adjust or reinterpret to meet modern tastes”. A business-like discussion of these points would seem to me more profitable than a renewed enumeration of my intellectual and academic shortcomings.

evam pauruṣeyāpauruṣeyabhedena āgamo dvividho nirūpitaḥ /. I translate *pauruṣeya* with “having an author”.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- JB = Bronkhorst, 1993
 SP = Phillips, 1995