

Mīmāṃsā, Ethics, and Secular Moral Philosophy

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Abstract

Mīmāṃsā, one of the six orthodox (*āstika*) schools of Indian philosophy, is renowned for its rigorous interpretation of the *Veda* and its systematic theory of ritual action. Beyond ritualism, however, it offers a rational and non-theistic vision of ethics grounded in *dharma* (duty). Emphasizing procedural morality and rule-governed action, it upholds the impersonal operation of moral law through *karma*, with the doctrine of *apūrva*—the unseen potency generated by correctly performed action—ensuring moral causality without divine intervention. Its hermeneutical methods for interpreting Vedic injunctions function as tools for structured moral reasoning, enabling the resolution of conflicts of duty and consistent ethical decision-making. This paper explores the secular and universal dimensions of *Mīmāṃsā* ethics by placing it in dialogue with Kantian deontology, rule utilitarianism, and contemporary legal and professional ethics. It also illustrates the relevance of *Mīmāṃsā* to civic responsibility, environmental stewardship, and ethical practice in pluralistic societies. By framing *Mīmāṃsā* as a system of procedural morality, the study repositions classical Indian thought as a valuable resource for global ethical discourse.

Keywords: *Mīmāṃsā*, *dharma*, *apūrva*, secular ethics, procedural morality, Kantian deontology, rule-based ethics.

Introduction

Ethics has always addressed the fundamental question of human life: What ought we to do? In the Indian philosophical tradition, this inquiry is inseparable from the concept of *dharma*, a term that encompasses moral duty, social responsibility, cosmic harmony, and the normative order that sustains human and natural life. Among the six classical schools of Indian thought, *Mīmāṃsā*—also known as *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā*—offers a distinctive vision of morality as a self-sufficient, rational, and non-theistic system. While the school is primarily renowned for its precise methodology in interpreting Vedic ritual injunctions, its philosophical

insights extend far beyond ritualism. *Mīmāṃsā* provides a model of ethics based on textual authority, procedural correctness, and impersonal obligation, illustrating that moral law can operate independently of divine command.

Central to the *Mīmāṃsā* system is the claim that the source of moral obligation lies in the *Veda*, which is *apauruṣeya*—authorless, eternal, and self-validating. As Śabara explains in his *Bhāṣya* on Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras*, “The *Veda* commands authority not because it is issued by a deity, but because it exists as an eternal linguistic and normative reality, free from error or subjective bias.”¹ Consequently, morality in *Mīmāṃsā* does not require a divine legislator or metaphysical theodicy; it is embedded in the structure of duty itself, expressed through *vidhi* (injunctions) and realized via *karma* (action) and *apūrva* (the unseen moral potency of action).

In this light, scholars such as B. K. Matilal have argued that classical Indian ethics, and *Mīmāṃsā* in particular, demonstrates a unique model of moral reasoning that is procedural and impersonal, paralleling the formalism of Kantian duty while remaining independent of theological premises.² Moreover, the system reflects the rational spirit emphasized by Satischandra Chatterjee and D. M. Datta, who note that *Mīmāṃsā* “upholds an objective moral order sustained by action, not faith, and interpretable by reason.”³ This situates *Mīmāṃsā* as a critical interlocutor for modern secular ethics, legal philosophy, and cross-cultural moral theory.

The Ethical Foundations of *Mīmāṃsā*: *Dharma*, *Karma*, and *Apūrva*

At the heart of *Mīmāṃsā* ethics lies the concept of *dharma*, which Jaimini famously defines in the opening *sūtra*: *codanā-lakṣaṇo artho dharmah*—“Dharma is that purpose which is indicated by a Vedic injunction.”⁴ This definition firmly situates morality in the realm of action rather than belief. In the *Mīmāṃsā* framework, *dharma* is not a matter of faith, divine grace, or inner spiritual state; it is that which ought to be done because the *Veda* prescribes it. This procedural and self-contained model of ethics is one of the most distinctive features of the *Mīmāṃsā* school, emphasizing that moral authority is embedded in duty itself rather than in metaphysical or theistic assumptions.

In this system, *karma* is understood as more than just the general principle of moral causation found in popular Indian thought. For the *Mīmāṃsakas*, *karma* is a precise procedural mechanism that links the performance of prescribed actions to specific results. The crucial doctrinal bridge between action and its eventual consequence is *apūrva*, the unseen potency or subtle effect generated by the correct execution of duty. Śabara, in his *Bhāṣya*, clarifies that “*Apūrva* is neither a material substance nor an act of divine intervention; rather, it represents the intrinsic moral efficacy that autonomously connects ritual and ethical performance with its fruit.”⁵ This concept allows *Mīmāṃsā* to articulate a self-regulating moral universe, where the causal chain of ethics operates without the need for a personal God.

Significantly, *Mīmāṃsā* places greater weight on the objective correctness of action than on the inner intention of the agent. While Western deontological frameworks, particularly Kantian ethics, often emphasize intention as the basis of moral worth, *Mīmāṃsā* maintains that the procedural adherence to duty alone is sufficient for generating *apūrva*. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, in his *Ślokavārttika*, asserts that “the efficacy of *dharma* arises from the action itself, even when the performer remains indifferent to the outcome.”⁶ This objectivity transforms *Mīmāṃsā* into a truly impersonal ethical system, where moral law is upheld through correct practice rather than personal belief or emotional motivation.

This vision of *Mīmāṃsā* ethics is reinforced by other classical commentators. Maṇḍana Mīśra, in his *Vidhiviveka*, elaborates that *dharma* operates as an intrinsic obligation arising from the *Veda*’s injunctions, which are self-validating and independent of divine will.⁷ Similarly, Prabhākara’s *Brṛhatī* commentary explains that moral authority in *Mīmāṃsā* is procedural and self-contained, a system where “correct action generates its own moral force without the need for external validation.”⁸ Modern scholars, such as J. N. Mohanty, have also noted that the *Mīmāṃsā* emphasis on action over intention reflects a highly formalized approach to ethics, making it particularly compatible with secular legal and professional systems.⁹

This vision of morality, rooted in rule-based action and self-sufficient moral causality, anticipates modern secular ethical frameworks. Just as legal and civic duties in contemporary societies operate independently of an individual’s private convictions, *Mīmāṃsā* presents a model of moral life sustained by procedural adherence and universalizable norms, offering a compelling classical precedent for non-theistic ethics.

The Hermeneutics of Duty: Language, Interpretation, and Moral Decision-Making

Mīmāṃsā is not merely a moral philosophy; it is also a highly sophisticated system of hermeneutics, offering a rigorous methodology for interpreting the Vedic corpus. Since *dharma* is defined as that which is enjoined by the *Veda*, the precise and faithful interpretation of Vedic language becomes central to the understanding of moral obligation. In the *Mīmāṃsā* view, moral philosophy is inseparable from textual reasoning: duties are discovered and validated through the careful analysis of linguistic structure, context, and procedural rules embedded in the Vedic injunctions.

The central claim of *Mīmāṃsā* is that Vedic injunctions (*vidhi*) constitute the ultimate source of moral knowledge. Unlike human-authored texts, which may carry the limitations of intention, error, or social bias, the *Veda* is *apauruṣeya*—eternal, authorless, and free from defect. Śābara, in his *Bhāṣya*, famously asserts that “The *Veda* does not instruct because a speaker commands, but because the words themselves have eternal potency in expressing what ought to be done.”¹⁰ This conception relocates the authority of moral law from divine command to

language itself, making ethics a rational, rule-governed, and impersonal process of interpretation.

Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics deploys an intricate set of interpretive principles, or *nyāyas*, to resolve ambiguities, apparent contradictions, and contextual challenges within the Vedic texts. Key interpretive tools include *ākāṅkṣā* (syntactic expectancy), *liṅga* (indicative sign), *vākya* (sentence meaning), *prakaraṇa* (contextual reference), and *sannidhi* (proximity or coherence). For instance, when a general injunction such as “One should perform Agnihotra daily” seems to conflict with a specific directive like “One should perform the Darśa ritual on the new moon day,” *Mīmāṃsā* interpreters invoke the principle that specific injunctions override general ones. This mirrors modern legal hermeneutics, where specific statutes take precedence over general laws.

The system also accounts for conditional duties (*kāmya karma*)—obligations triggered by particular desires or circumstances. A statement like “He who desires progeny should perform the Putrakāmeṣṭi” reflects a conditional injunction, binding only upon the presence of that specific aim. Through such fine-grained linguistic analysis, *Mīmāṃsā* delineates the scope, priority, and binding nature of moral obligations, functioning with a precision comparable to contemporary legal and professional reasoning.

Apadeva’s *Mīmāṃsānyāyaprakāśa* (*Mīmāṃsā Paribhāṣā*) further illustrates the depth of this hermeneutical framework, emphasizing the centrality of linguistic indicators (*liṅga*) and contextual consistency (*prakaraṇa*) in determining the binding nature of Vedic duties.¹¹ P. V. Kane highlights that *Mīmāṃsā* hermeneutics “became the very foundation of Hindu law and jurisprudence, as every legal and ritual question ultimately required textual adjudication.”¹² Francis X. Clooney, in his comparative work, argues that the “procedural rigor of *Mīmāṃsā* hermeneutics mirrors the interpretive reasoning of both canon law and modern legal systems.”¹³

By rooting morality in textual interpretation and procedural logic rather than divine command or subjective intuition, *Mīmāṃsā* articulates a model of procedural ethics. Duties are knowable, universalizable, and rationally interpretable; ethical life is thus sustained through rule compliance, systematic reasoning, and context-sensitive interpretation. This hermeneutical approach demonstrates how a classical Indian ritual tradition can serve as a foundation for modern secular ethical theory, bridging the gap between scriptural authority and contemporary rule-based moral systems.

***Mīmāṃsā* as a Secular Moral Philosophy: Duty Without Theism**

One of the most striking and philosophically significant aspects of *Mīmāṃsā* is its ability to sustain a complete and coherent ethical system without reliance on theism. While the school does not explicitly deny the existence of gods (*devas*), it relegates them to functional roles within ritual performance rather than elevating them as ultimate moral authorities. Śābara’s commentary on Jaimini’s *Mīmāṃsā*

Sūtras makes this position unmistakably clear: “The *Veda* is authoritative not because it is spoken by a god, but because it is eternal and uncreated.”¹⁴ In other words, the binding force of moral obligation in *Mīmāṃsā* arises from the textual authority of the *Veda* itself, which is *apauruṣeya*—authorless, self-sufficient, and free from error.

In this framework, moral obligation emerges from textual injunctions and procedural correctness, not from divine will or fear of punishment. The gods, though often invoked as ritual recipients, play no essential role in moral enforcement. The efficacy of both ritual and ethical action is attributed to *apūrva*, the unseen potency or causal link generated by the correct performance of duty. This creates a self-contained moral universe, where actions produce their effects autonomously through an impersonal causal chain, without any requirement for divine supervision or metaphysical intervention.

This non-theistic orientation makes *Mīmāṃsā* resonate strongly with Enlightenment-era secular moral philosophies in the West. Kantian deontology, for example, grounds morality in pure reason and the categorical imperative rather than in divine command. Likewise, *Mīmāṃsā* affirms that duty is binding by virtue of its impersonal, self-validating source in the *Veda*, and that moral efficacy arises from correct action rather than faith or inner devotion. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa’s *Ślokavārttika* further underscores this point, explaining that the unseen efficacy of duty is generated through performance alone, and not by any intentional invocation of divine authority.¹⁵

Modern legal and political philosophy also finds resonance here. H. L. A. Hart’s *The Concept of Law* suggests that legal systems maintain their authority not because of divine sanction but because of accepted procedural rules that govern behavior.¹⁶ In a similar fashion, *Mīmāṃsā* articulates a procedural moral system that sustains ethical order through codified rules and consistent practice. John Rawls’s framework of public reason and political liberalism, which insists on justifying social obligations in ways accessible to all citizens regardless of belief, aligns with *Mīmāṃsā*’s principle that duty can be understood and enacted independently of private faith.¹⁷

By removing the need for divine enforcement, *Mīmāṃsā* anticipates the requirements of modern pluralistic and secular societies, where ethical systems must be universally intelligible and publicly justifiable. Its model of procedural, rule-based morality aligns with contemporary notions of public reason and professional ethics, which seek to establish moral norms independent of private religious belief. In this way, *Mīmāṃsā* demonstrates that classical Indian thought can serve as a philosophically robust precedent for constructing non-theistic, rational, and universally applicable moral frameworks, capable of guiding ethical life in diverse and multicultural contexts.

***Mīmāṃsā* in Dialogue with Western Ethical Theories**

The study of *Mīmāṃsā* becomes particularly illuminating when examined in comparative dialogue with Western moral philosophy. Despite emerging in vastly different historical and cultural contexts, *Mīmāṃsā* and several Western traditions share a commitment to rule-based, impersonal, and rational ethics, while diverging in their respective emphases on intention versus action, and on textual versus rational sources of moral authority. Among Western frameworks, Kantian deontology offers the closest conceptual parallel. Kant maintains that an action is morally worthy only if it is performed from a sense of duty, guided by a maxim that can be universalized through the categorical imperative. In contrast, *Mīmāṃsā* locates moral efficacy not in the agent's inner intention but in the correct procedural performance of duty, as defined by Vedic injunctions. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, in his *Ślokavārttika*, explicitly argues that *apūrva*—the unseen potency linking action to its result—“is generated by action alone, regardless of the performer's internal motivation or desire.”¹⁸ This creates a divergence: while Kant privileges moral intention, *Mīmāṃsā* prioritizes objective action and rule compliance. Yet, the two systems converge in their rejection of purely consequentialist ethics and in their ability to ground moral obligation without recourse to divine command.

Rule utilitarianism provides another fruitful point of comparison. Unlike classical act utilitarianism, which evaluates the moral worth of individual actions by their immediate outcomes, rule utilitarianism stresses that adherence to established rules produces the greatest long-term benefit for society. *Mīmāṃsā*'s notion of *apūrva* functions analogously: correct performance of duty generates reliable moral outcomes in a self-regulating ethical system, even if the results are unseen or delayed. This rule-based orientation resonates strongly with modern legal and professional ethics, where procedural compliance—rather than immediate outcomes—sustains institutional integrity and social order.

Furthermore, contemporary scholars like B. K. Matilal have highlighted that the *Mīmāṃsā* approach to action as an objective moral requirement parallels Western formalism while maintaining a distinct cultural grounding.¹⁹ John Stuart Mill's reflections on the social utility of rules, particularly in the later chapters of *Utilitarianism*, indirectly resonate with the *Mīmāṃsā* framework by emphasizing that moral life flourishes when grounded in predictable and rationally understood obligations rather than isolated, ad hoc calculations.²⁰ The interpretive sophistication of *Mīmāṃsā* also aligns closely with the reasoning methods of contemporary legal philosophy, as discussed by H. L. A. Hart, who demonstrates that systems of law rely on shared recognition of procedural authority rather than metaphysical or religious validation.²¹

By framing morality as a system of rationally interpretable duties, *Mīmāṃsā* anticipates the procedural rationality that underpins modern secular ethical reasoning and rule-of-law frameworks. In bringing *Mīmāṃsā* into dialogue with

Western ethical thought, we see that classical Indian philosophy provides valuable resources for constructing non-theistic, rule-governed moral systems. It demonstrates that ethical life can be sustained through procedural adherence and rational interpretation, offering insights that are increasingly relevant to pluralistic, legally structured, and secular societies.

Practical Applications of *Mīmāṃsā* Ethics in Contemporary Contexts

Although *Mīmāṃsā* is deeply rooted in the ritual culture of ancient India, its ethical framework naturally extends into modern life. By emphasizing procedural duty, rational interpretation, and impersonal moral law, the system provides a robust model for secular ethics that can meaningfully inform contemporary practices in law, professional conduct, civic responsibility, and environmental stewardship. Its central insight—that moral order is maintained through disciplined adherence to rules rather than subjective belief—makes it highly adaptable to the demands of pluralistic, rational, and global societies.

In the field of law, *Mīmāṃsā*'s hermeneutical methods anticipate key principles of modern legal reasoning. Its interpretive rules, such as giving precedence to specific injunctions over general ones, resolving apparent contradictions contextually, and deriving obligations through careful textual analysis, mirror the interpretive strategies employed by courts in statutory and constitutional law. Robert Lingat observes that “the method of *Mīmāṃsā* was so precise that it became the foundation for the entire interpretive tradition of Hindu law.”²² By relying on procedural rationality rather than divine command, *Mīmāṃsā* models a jurisprudential philosophy in which the authority of law resides in codified rules and their rational application, aligning closely with secular, rule-of-law systems.

Professional ethics similarly benefits from *Mīmāṃsā*'s rule-based orientation. Professions such as medicine, engineering, education, and public administration depend on codified codes of conduct that function as procedural moral frameworks. Just as ritual efficacy in *Mīmāṃsā* depends on precise, disciplined performance, professional integrity relies on consistent adherence to established protocols. A physician's duty to follow clinical guidelines, or an engineer's obligation to adhere to safety codes, represents a form of procedural *dharma* that sustains public trust, fairness, and accountability irrespective of the practitioner's personal motives or beliefs. In corporate governance and governmental administration, this approach reinforces the principle that ethical legitimacy flows from faithful execution of duties, ensuring transparency, predictability, and social trust.

Civic responsibility provides another vital arena where *Mīmāṃsā*'s insights remain relevant. In modern democracies, citizens uphold social and legal order through the observance of laws, regulations, and civic duties. *Mīmāṃsā*'s understanding that moral order arises from disciplined action rather than metaphysical belief resonates strongly with secular social ethics, where collective obligations—such as voting, paying taxes, observing traffic laws, and supporting

public health measures—sustain community life. This conception promotes a vision of citizenship as procedural duty, a perspective highly compatible with pluralistic societies that rely on shared action over shared faith.

The relevance of *Mīmāṃsā* also extends into environmental responsibility. The doctrine of *apūrva*, which links unseen effects to correct action, can be analogized to sustainability practices. Just as a Vedic ritual generates long-term merit without immediate perceptible results, actions like reducing pollution, conserving natural resources, reforestation, and protecting ecosystems yield future benefits that preserve ecological balance. Scholars like B. K. Matilal and Wilhelm Halbfass have argued that the logic of unseen moral efficacy in classical Indian philosophy provides a conceptual foundation for actions whose consequences manifest over generations, including environmental stewardship.²³⁻²⁴ By emphasizing procedural action over immediate consequence, *Mīmāṃsā* strengthens the ethical case for sustainability and ecological care, even in the absence of instant or personal rewards.

By demonstrating that ethical order is sustained by rule-based, rationally interpretable actions, *Mīmāṃsā* bridges ancient philosophy and modern ethical practice. Its procedural model of morality not only addresses legal, professional, and civic challenges, but also inspires long-term ecological responsibility, making it a timeless resource for ethical reasoning in contemporary pluralistic societies.

Contemporary Significance and Global Ethical Relevance

In today's increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world, the demand for moral frameworks that transcend sectarian or strictly theistic commitments is more urgent than ever. Contemporary societies are composed of diverse religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions, which often require shared ethical principles that can function independently of any single metaphysical or doctrinal foundation. In this context, *Mīmāṃsā* offers a historical precedent and philosophical resource for constructing such a universalizable, non-theistic framework of ethics, grounded in rationality, procedural logic, and impersonal moral obligation.

Mīmāṃsā's core principles—its emphasis on rule-based duty, hermeneutical reasoning, and the self-sufficiency of moral law—resonate strongly with the ethical requirements of modern secular societies. As a model for non-theistic moral reasoning, it demonstrates that moral obligation arises from the systematic interpretation of impersonal rules, rather than divine command. Actions generate predictable moral outcomes through the principle of *apūrva*, without requiring intervention from a personal deity. This procedural understanding of morality aligns with contemporary secular ethics, which seeks to develop universal principles that can guide behavior across religious and cultural divides, fostering civic harmony and social trust.

From a cross-cultural philosophical perspective, *Mīmāṃsā* significantly enriches

the global discourse on ethics. Scholars such as Wilhelm Halbfass have observed that Indian traditions like *Mīmāṃsā* illustrate “the possibility of moral worlds founded on textual and ritual order, yet still capable of rational universality.”²⁵ B. K. Matilal also emphasizes that classical Indian moral theories, especially those focused on *dharma* and *karma*, offer insights into how procedural and rule-based ethics can operate independently of intention or metaphysical justification, creating a moral framework that is simultaneously rigorous and inclusive.²⁶ Unlike many Western ethical theories that prioritize intention (as in Kantian deontology) or consequence (as in utilitarianism), *Mīmāṃsā* highlights the objective, procedural performance of duty as the foundation of moral efficacy. This perspective expands and diversifies the global conversation about what constitutes moral obligation, offering an approach that is impersonal, rule-governed, and logically coherent.

The practical implications of *Mīmāṃsā*'s ethical framework extend into law, professional conduct, civic life, and environmental responsibility. Its emphasis on consistent interpretation and procedural adherence parallels the requirements of modern legal systems, where justice depends on rule compliance and rational adjudication rather than personal belief. In professional ethics, *Mīmāṃsā*'s focus on objective duty performance provides a philosophical grounding for codes of conduct that rely on impartiality and procedural fairness.²⁷ Even in environmental ethics, the system's principle of duty independent of personal desire supports the cultivation of collective responsibility toward ecological stewardship, aligning with contemporary global calls for sustainability and intergenerational justice.²⁸

By demonstrating that ethical systems can function effectively without dependence on metaphysical or theistic belief, *Mīmāṃsā* establishes a conceptual bridge between ancient Indian thought and contemporary global ethical discourse. It affirms that a procedural, rational, and universally interpretable moral framework can sustain both personal integrity and social order, making it profoundly relevant to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Upon close examination, *Mīmāṃsā* reveals itself to be far more than a school concerned with Vedic ritualism; it is a comprehensive and philosophically robust system of secular moral reasoning. By defining *dharma* as that which is enjoined by impersonal textual authority, *Mīmāṃsā* constructs a self-contained ethical universe that operates independently of divine command, metaphysical speculation, or subjective belief. Its central doctrines of *dharma*, *karma*, and *apūrva* articulate a model in which moral efficacy arises from the precise and disciplined performance of duty, sustained by an impersonal and self-regulating moral law.

Through its highly developed hermeneutical methods, *Mīmāṃsā* demonstrates that language, logic, and procedural rules can sustain a complete moral framework without the need for a divine legislator. By carefully interpreting

Vedic injunctions using its system of *nyāyas* and contextual principles, it models a form of rational moral deliberation that is strikingly relevant to modern systems of law and professional ethics. The conceptual resonance with Kantian deontology—which also grounds moral obligation in the universality of duty rather than in consequence or divine will—highlights the cross-cultural significance of *Mīmāṃsā*. Similarly, the alignment with rule utilitarianism and contemporary legal philosophy confirms its practical applicability in secular moral discourse, where procedural adherence and rule-governed action underpin institutional and civic life.

Moreover, the procedural and impersonal character of *Mīmāṃsā* ethics makes it particularly suited to the ethical demands of pluralistic, global societies, where shared moral frameworks must be accessible to reason, universally interpretable, and independent of any single religious doctrine. Its insistence that moral life can flourish without theism provides an important precedent for the development of non-theistic, rational, and culturally inclusive ethical systems that address modern challenges such as civic responsibility, environmental stewardship, and professional conduct.

Recent scholarship reinforces this cross-temporal relevance. Satischandra Chatterjee and D. M. Datta highlight that *Mīmāṃsā* establishes an “objective and impersonal moral order,” sustained by action and procedure rather than metaphysical postulates.²⁹ Similarly, J. N. Mohanty argues that the *Mīmāṃsā* framework demonstrates the possibility of a moral life rooted in rational interpretation of rules, which resonates with global ethical theory today.³⁰

By bridging classical Indian thought and contemporary moral philosophy, *Mīmāṃsā* invites us to reconsider the foundations of ethics in terms of rules, duties, and impersonal moral causation. It offers both a historical model and a philosophical resource for living responsibly in a rational, interconnected, and pluralistic world, affirming that morality, rooted in disciplined action and universalizable duty, can thrive without reliance on metaphysical or theistic assumptions.

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