

## SYSTEMS AND LEFWORLDS: A HABERMASIAN CRITIQUE OF MAJOR TRENDS IN CLASSICAL INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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*Abstract: In the present paper I would give a brief exposition of the distinctions between lifeworld and systems as expounded by Habermas. In the backdrop of this distinction I would present a philosophical review of some of the epistemological and ontological theories propounded by the chief proponents of realist (Nyāya), idealist (Buddhist) and linguistic/grammatician (Bhartrhari) schools of thought in Indian philosophy. In this project I would be guided by an interest to discover if there were any schools of thought in classical India which had tenets supportive of a Lifeworld rather than a System.*

My submission here is that any universal claim of linguistic understanding through tradition as argued by some major orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, can only be maintained if it is realized that the context of tradition as a focal point of possible truth and factual agreement could as well be at the locus of factual untruth and continued force. My further contention is that given Mimamsaka's and Bhartrhari's skepticism regarding the role of communicative rationality in the Habermasian sense of the term, there is no possibility of imaging a lifeworld under these systems. Thus the kind of social ontologies that could possibly emerge from the tenets of the above discussed schools of Indian philosophy could never be of the nature of the lifeworld since there is no possibility of communicative actions under the tenets of these thought systems. One of the foremost tasks of philosophers is to look for order in the way things are or suggest ways that may make a better order possible among things. Habermas takes up the same old cause of philosophy and looks afresh at the question of social order especially in the wake of a post-Heideggerian hermeneutical turn in answer to this question. But the question – how are things ordered? – is subsequent to the question – what is the actual nature of things? In general 'what' questions are always prior to 'how' questions since order of things (how) cannot be studied in isolation from our ontological presumptions (what) regarding those things. Similarly it is important to first study the ontological nature of society to theorize about the order of society. Habermas' views on these issues have already been a subject of vast discussions among scholars, but Habermas' theory of social ontology and its metaphysics is important not only from the socio-political point of view but also from the point of view of how it throws into relief the link between ontological presumptions and ethical beliefs within a particular philosophical system. In this regard Habermas' distinction between Lifeworld and Systems is crucial. The distinction between lifeworld and systems is built upon a further distinction between instrumental or strategic actions on one hand and

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communicative actions on the other. In the present paper I would give a brief exposition of the distinctions between lifeworld and systems as expounded by Habermas. In the backdrop of this distinction I would present a philosophical review of some of the epistemological and ontological theories propounded by the chief proponents of realist (Nyāya), idealist (Buddhist) and linguistic/grammarians (Bhartrhari) schools of thought in Indian philosophy. In this project I would be guided by an interest to discover if there were any schools of thought in classical India which had tenets supportive of a Lifeworld rather than a System.

### I. Habermas' Conception of System and Lifeworld

That the things should be intelligible to us is not only a philosophical incumbency but a psychological need as well. If things make sense to us then our actions directed towards those things also make sense. That means to say that our actions depend upon how we look at the objects around us. This further implies that one of the ways to justify our actions could be to give a cognitive explanation of the world around us. But this is only the empirical part of the issue. Our judgments and cognitions are not value free. We have no direct value free pre-linguistic connection with the world. The ways things seem to us are also the ways we have chosen to see them. Our language provides us pre-determined choices regarding how we could see the world. Since we share the language with the community, we share our ways of acting towards the world as well. Thus actions are communicative just like language essentially is at least in its free speech use.

Habermas maintains that a correct understanding of meaning of an action is tantamount to correct grasp of the reasons for which it is performed. Further he argues that these reasons are embedded in the linguisticity of our being. Since language is a shared phenomenon the action and its meaning and reasons for which it is performed should in principle be accessible both to the interpreter and the agent, rather than being in the domain of agent alone. Thus in Habermas' philosophy the problem of understanding the meaning of an action depends upon the understanding of the reasons for which it is performed all of which are subject to public domain. One could take it a step further from here and argue that the problem of how the meaning generating process becomes possible in language has an intimate connection with the question – how does knowledge become possible in language. Further fallout of this conception would be that our ideas regarding knowledge and language have an important bearing upon how we act and how we understand actions. If the problem of understanding actions rests upon problems of meaning and language then the arena of our inquiry into meaning of actions becomes much wider. We have to remember that Habermas is writing in Post-Heideggerian period and is greatly influenced by philosophical hermeneutical tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer. The gamut of language as we all know is too vast. We give command in language so do we denote and in the same act connote. Above all we understand and articulate questions regarding language and subsequent answers to them also in language. Depending upon which aspect of language we give primacy over others our view regarding actions would also differ. Habermas gives primacy to what he calls pragmatic function of speech over its denotative and imperative roles. According to Habermas primary function of language is to bring interlocutors to a shared understanding and to

facilitate an intersubjective consensus among them. Habermas argues that this function of language should always have priority over its function of denoting the way the world is. Habermas writes: “One simply would not know what it is to understand the meaning of a single linguistic expression if one did not know how one could make use of it in order to reach understanding with someone about something.”<sup>1</sup> There is teleological strand running within this conception of speech. When two or more persons enter into a dialogue then it is through the tracks and path thus revealed to them within the gamut of language that they discover a common ground to meet what Habermas calls ‘*rationales Verständnis*’ which means consensus reached on the basis of rationality. He uses the word ‘*verständigung*’ to denote the process of reaching the consensus. Thus when we participate in a dialogue, we do so with a view to reach a common ground on an issue. This could be viewed as the *telos* which propels the dialogue towards itself. Bringing out this teleological structure of dialogue, Habermas writes, “reaching understanding inhabits human-speech as its *telos*.”<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Heidegger and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics which locates the possibility of dialogue in individual’s effective historical consciousness driven towards fusion of horizon, Habermas locates them in shared reason. Thus he maintains that the meaning of what we say and what we do is shared and public because meaning depends on reason and reason on Habermas’ account is shared and public. As we have seen in the preceding paragraphs that for Habermas meaning of action is founded upon the reasons adduced for it, accordingly under this scheme of things, when we make a free speech act, implicit and embedded in it are the following two different kinds of validity claims namely, epistemological claim to truth, and ethical claim to rightness. Validity claim to truth only means that whenever I make a proposition and claim it to be true, then what I am implicitly saying is that I have good enough conscious reasons to believe it to be true, and since reason is a share phenomenon I am prepared to convince the interlocutor with the same set of reasons. Similarly in an analogous way validity claim to rightness and truthfulness only means that when I make these claims I rationally subscribe to the norms underlying that statement. To put it simply, it only means that when I utter a moral statement in a dialogue, I am committed to provide rational justification for that norm.

The important point that one must note here is that in Habermasian scheme of things truth is viewed as depending upon reason and validity and not vice-versa. Another important point is that according to Habermas meaning is an intersubjective affair rather than an objective one. This indicates his hermeneutical legacy. Habermas in contrast to some of the realist theories of meaning suggests that meanings are not determined by the speaker’s relation to the external world but emerges from the relationship between things and words. But all in all one of the most important contributions of Habermas to the history of ideas is the link he has explicated between language and ethics. How we know or rather how we think we know has inevitable consequence upon how we look at our ethical and subsequently socio-political predicaments.

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<sup>1</sup>Habermas, J. On the Pragmatics of Communication, ed. Maeve Cooke, Polity Press, Cambridge 1998. p. 228

<sup>2</sup>Habermas, J. The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1984. p.287.

Apart from Habermas' views on language we should also examine how he tries to link it with questions concerning ethics and polity. In this regard it is important to understand Habermas' distinction between instrumental and communicative action. If we were to understand this distinction generally then we could understand it in terms of means and end relationship. Most of us would agree that discovering the goals and ends of our life is a long and arduous process and most of the times it is as long as it is important. Since all understanding including the knowledge of our ends in life is within the arena of language and dialogue, these goals cannot be extrinsic to or outside of linguisticity of our being. The discovery of these goals is actually a part of the dialogical process. But often at times it so happens that motives behind a dialogue are already defined and strategies to realize them are already operational in the dialogue process. In these cases the aim of the interlocutors is not to discover the shared goals, rather the aim is to coerce the others in the dialogue towards a pre-conceived end. Broadly speaking in a dialogue such actions where the end is already pre-conceived are called by Habermas as instrumental or strategic actions. In communicative actions on the other hand interlocutors participate in a dialogue with a view to discover shared goals and means such that the ends gradually emerge from the means. According to Habermas the way we look at other interlocutors in a dialogue shapes up our view towards the society. Habermas argues that depending upon our ethical outlook in terms of instrumental or communicative actions, two different kinds of social ontologies come into picture. The ontological conceptions of society resulting from instrumental and communicative actions are termed as 'lifeworld' and 'system' respectively by Habermas. Lifeworld according to Habermas is vast expanse of space posited with shared meanings and values in which communicative action of the interlocutors in a dialogue become possible. No lifeworld can have a definite, fully formed structure. It rather exists like an ongoing play (spiel) always evolving as it goes on. Its inner movement albeit communicative is its life, as it goes through changes, revisions and onward growth, all of which are necessarily piecemeal and gradual. In principle these changes could even be total though lifeworld itself is a unity of shared meanings and values but is itself not a totality. This is an important distinction because the structure of the lifeworld is such that the meanings and understandings emerging within it are thematized in individual instances of dialogue but it cannot be thematized all at once in a totality. Thus lifeworld has an inner bursting movement, but it never moves outside of itself and in that sense does not really have an outside of itself. What Habermas calls 'system' on the other hand is a repertory of reified social structures and established patterns of instrumental actions. As we have already discussed in cases of strategic actions, agents conceal their aims and try to steer the dialogue process towards a pre-conceived end. Such patterns of actions are institutionalized and reified in Systems. Further these actions are conceived and projected as actual or natural ways of looking at things. Thus systems work on projection of themselves as what Habermas calls a 'block of quasi-natural reality'<sup>3</sup>, as if these structures are beyond revision and human control.

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<sup>3</sup>Habermas, J. *The Theory of Communicative Action vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. T. McCarthy Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987. p.32.

## II. Language and Ethics in Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā and Grammarian School of Indian Philosophy

The philosophical systems of classical India are conventionally divided into two groups viz. orthodox (āstika) and heterodox (nāstika). Orthodox schools are named so because they believe in the scriptural authority of the Vedas. Vedas are mainly a set of injunctions which prescribe certain actions in order to achieve certain desired results. Mīmāṃsā school of Indian philosophy maintains that the scriptural authority of Vedas is binding because these are authorless (apauruṣey) texts. These texts could be viewed as a set of meaningful words and sentences that do not have an outside of themselves in a strictly hermeneutical sense because they are never written or intended by any author at any point of time. This means to say that the authority of Vedas and what is intended to be prescribed in them is non-contingent upon time and space and therefore absolute.

The only sure sign of life on earth is change which presupposes some activity. Activities presuppose a potent desire for change. Mīmāṃsakas thus would imagine the world as emerging from a matrix of desires, actions and their fruits. If we arrange the co-ordinates of this matrix in a chronological order it would appear like this – there are desires prompting us to perform actions which are followed by results or their fruits. Thus there are desires first, followed by action propelled by them with attainment of fruit as the ultimate result. Now if the human world is viewed as governed by this matrix, then we need to look at the starting point of the chain namely desire or inclination. This would also explain to us where the role of words comes into picture in the Mīmāṃsakas scheme of things. In other words the whole issue boils down to what triggers the inclination in us to produce a specific result. Answer to this question differs depending upon the other tenets of the particular thought system. For example, Naiyāyikas, the realist, pluralist school of Indian philosophy, would contend that inclination in the sense of a psychological response is originated in us depending upon the nature (*svabhāva*) of the object in question and how that object fits into an aggregate of other extraneous conditions which together trigger a specific psychological response in the human subject. Naiyāyikas recognize only three kinds of psychological responses namely like or dislike for the object or indifference towards it. Depending upon the psychological response the action of either procuring the object or avoiding it or letting it be ensues in the ethical subject. Another notable response in this regard comes from the Indian Grammarian Bhartrhari. According to him desires and inclinations as a part of in-depth grammar of our linguistic understanding of things is something genetically inherently given to us. Explaining it through an analogy of cuckoo bird, Bhartrhari states:

The whole world considers that to be the authority (in daily life). Even the activities of animals develop because of that. Just as some substances acquire the power to intoxicate and the like by mere maturity, without the help of any special effort, in the same way are intuitions produced in those that possess them. Who transforms the voice of the male cuckoo in spring? Who teaches living beings to build nests etc.? Who goads beasts and birds on to actions like eating, loving, hating, swimming etc. associated with particular species and pedigrees? This intuition is the result of Tradition (āgama) accompanied by

*bhāvana*. The Tradition is differentiated in as much as it is proximate or remote.<sup>4</sup>

Thus as evident from these verses human dispositions on Bhartrhari's account are entirely a product of our overall linguistic constitution. All understanding is linguistic understanding and language has its own unalterable, pre-given grammar which conditions our thoughts and subsequently our actions. But through the passage of time the grammar ingrained in the tradition gets corrupted and so do our dispositions towards the world. Therefore getting the pure originary form of grammar back in place would put our actions in place too.

On Mimamsaka's account on the other hand words are the trigger point of the whole chain. Vedic words are authorless and without a beginning in time and as such they have priority over anything that has a beginning and an end. Vedic words furthermore are essentially prescriptive in nature. If we view words in terms of actions and results then words can only have prescriptive role to play in such a worldview. The reflexive psychological mechanism of a human person is taken and given and natural and never put into question by the Mīmāṃsakas. Vedas also similarly could be viewed as a set of procedures conducive to the perfection of human desire principles. There is a bit of circularity also involved here. Vedas presuppose human desire principles and suggest themselves as an instrument towards their fulfillment at the same time onus of triggering the right thought towards the appropriate action towards the specific desired result lies with the Vedic word and not with the human subject. The first verse of Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā Sūtras lays bare the very aim of Mīmāṃsā enquiry. Literally translated this sūtra would mean "therefore an enquiry into duty."<sup>5</sup> (*athāto dharma jijnyāsa*). As indicated here, the primary aim of Mīmāṃsā enquiry seems to be to analyze the notion of duty and its concomitant obligation. Vedic sentences on Mīmāṃsakas account do not tell that so and so is the case but rather their function is to produce an obligation in the reader to act in certain ways so as to make something the case. But then how could words produce in us a sense of obligation and subsequently propel us to action? The problem becomes further complicated when words under consideration are neither spoken words nor the written ones. They are rather words not born out of human effort (*apauruṣey*). Notwithstanding they are supposed to have an intended meaning. An answer to this question is indicated if not explicitly answered in the fifth verse of Mīmāṃsā Sutrās, where Jaimini says: "The connection between a word and its meaning is natural. The (Vedic) injunctions are, therefore, the only means of knowing duty (dharma)." Further he writes: "Duty consists of a total obedience to all the injunctions that can be found in the Vedas. (*codana laksano artho dharmah*)."<sup>6</sup>

As hinted in this sūtra the ethics of Mīmāṃsā rests on their theory of meaning. As noted in the earlier cited sūtra, the relationship between the word and its meaning is *autpattika* which is generally translated as natural but also has a sense of pre-ordained, inborn or innate. The main purport of this conception is that the meaning in language is prior to human understanding. In other words it is not a

<sup>4</sup>Verses 147-151 Vakyapadiya of Bhartrhari, Kānda II (trans. K. A. Subramania Iyer) Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi. 1977 p. 61-62.

<sup>5</sup>Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā Sūtras verse I.1.1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. I.1.5

result of some later implicit accord or a convention agreed upon by the users of the language as maintained by some Naiyāyikas. This insinuates an understanding of the relationship between the word and its meaning already suggested by Bhartrhari that the ways we use language and our ability to make connection with the meaning in language is prior to human understanding. Expression and communication in a language is a miniscule part of the total gamut and influence of language. The main and substantive part of linguistic understanding lies in the process of imbuing meaning and its dissemination in the reader or the listener. Thus just like for Bhartrhari language is the origin of all that exists, material or immaterial; for Mīmāṃsakas too there is an organic link between language and human conduct. Human conduct has to be in strict correspondence with the structure of language if it has to qualify as ethical. Language on this account is merely a manifestation of an inborn capacity among language users which determinates the relationship between words and their meaning. Language therefore cannot be explained only as a means of achieving tasks like communication nor can the structure of language be viewed as a set of rules which regulate some pre-existing activity. Rather, the inherent, innate or inborn structure of language constitutes and governs our linguistic activity which in the case of Mīmāṃsā is confined to producing obligation in the hearer to act or not to act in specific ways in adherence to *dharma* or duty. One of the important fallout of such view would be that under this scheme of things ethics has to be regarded as direct act-manifestation of structure of language. Conversely an action has to be in strict congruence with this structure if it has to qualify as ethical. One of the implications of such view would be that ethics as a mode of structure of language has to be viewed as having pre-determined, unalterable, self-sacrosanct structure. This also gives us a cue to understand why Vedic words are held to be unwritten or without an author. Author being herself a product of the very structures of language in use is thus as good as dead. Thus to sum up the discussion one could say that since Vedic words are regarded as eternal and infallible and since they have no author or arbiter, they have no purpose other extrinsic to themselves and also their obligatory force cannot be explained in any extraneous terms.

This idea could also be understood in terms of some later developments in the study of language. There is no denying to the fact that a human subject is born into a language. If we were to ask what could have come first, the intention to speak or the language with its predefined structure, we are more likely to believe that it is the latter. The most plausible reason for it would be that the language arranges and structures the world for us. We have no way to understand what we could mean by non-verbal comprehension. Furthermore, non-verbal comprehension even if it exists would be an empty world or a world that is vain and devoid of values. No intention to speak could emerge from such a world. Therefore it is more plausible to believe that language comes prior to our intention to speak. But as soon as we have decided upon priority of language over intention to speak we have another set of questions emerging from the other end. Some of these questions that concern us in the present context are as follows:

If the language is *a priori*, then our judgments about the world are *a priori* structured for us too. Now if this conclusion is followed seriously it would lead to host of unavoidable problems which as we would see later seem impossible to recover from. What I am trying to hint at is that both the realist schools of

classical Indian philosophy, Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā, maintain that structure of language has a strict correspondence with the structure of the world and therefore to knowledge and actions. Whereas for Bhartrhari the two are organically suffused together into śabda Brahman (*a priori* linguistic principle), for Naiyāyikas and Mīmāṃsakas the two are separate but reflect a strict structural unity. Given this presumption about language, simple ethical questions like how to act in a given situation? Or ethical commands or Vedic injunctions for that matter are also shaped within the same *a priori* structure and would thus require strictly one correct answer. But this plain looking outcome of the realist presumption is infested with a host of inextricably mixed problems. Ethics is about deciding right from wrong. It is about dilemmas and ambiguities. But the realist account of knowledge (their theory of knowledge) leaves a little scope for such ambiguities. Therefore if we assume that language reveals the world to us to its fullest extent and if we further believe that language has no ambiguities about itself, then the need for ethical considerations and judgment would be forever lost. If the meaning is fixed, then also there would be fixed ways of acting towards the world. In other words there would not be right or wrong ways of acting but only the correct or incorrect ones. As a matter of fact any perspective towards the study of language which advocates the fixity of meaning would do so in an endeavor to steer its overall philosophical program towards certain orthodoxy. But it does not require much philosophical reflection to understand that nature and scope of ethics as a sub-discipline of philosophy would lose much of its richness in its realist orthodox garb. Orthodox philosophies relying on scriptural authority of certain texts and tradition leave hardly any scope for ethical dilemmas. Ethical failure for such philosophies would be tantamount to cognitive failure in terms of grasping of actual linguistic meaning of the Vedic injunction or the authority of tradition.

After having an overview of grammarian and Mīmāṃsakas notion of ethics and how it relates to language, we could shift our attention to Bhartrhari's notion of tradition as the storehouse of pure form of grammar. Bhartrhari while sharing above concern with Mīmāṃsakas resorts to the beginninglessness of the word as a safer haven for the defense of the authority of scriptural words. On his view, since there is no beginning of the word, they could be held to be uncaused and something that is uncaused and eternal lies outside the realm of intellect and thus the authority thereof is not liable to any reasoning or examination. But this is only half the answer to the actual problem. Even if the word is without a beginning and is necessarily immutable, it has its existential value only in so far as it has speakers, writers and readers and so far as this contingency is inevitable, there is always a possibility of the incorrect usage and coercive acceptance of that incorrect usage. Similarly correct grammar is also contingent upon user-community. How does one make sure that there are no deviations within the user-community? Further, how do we know whether the language we are using has correct grammar or not. Who points this out? Further, if our word usage is not correct then how or wherefrom do we know the correct grammar? Bhartrhari in answer to these problems points out that there are two communities in a society viz. user-community and the learned-community. The community of the learned knows both the incorrect grammar in use and the correct grammar. The onus is upon them to point out the incorrect usage wherever possible and the correct usage thereof as well. Bhartrhari calls this community of the learned as cultured people (*śiṣṭa*). On Bhartrhari's view, because of this group of cultured people and



the passing-on of knowledge or learning through them, a continuity of system is formed which he calls *vyavasthā-nityatā*. He writes: “Whether words be eternal or otherwise, their beginning is not known. As in the case of living beings, there is what is called continuity of tradition (*vyavasthā-nityatā*).”<sup>7</sup> The element of unbroken continuity in tradition is an important point that Bhartrhari invokes in support of the authority of tradition. According to him: “Nobody can violate, on the basis of reasoning, those paths of dharma which have come down without a break, because they are accepted in the world.”<sup>8</sup> So tradition on this account being characterized by continuous uninterrupted flow has to be accepted because it has always been accepted by people without a break in time. But is this a good enough reason to undermine reason vis-à-vis authority of tradition. Bhartrhari offers arguments against the limitations of reasoning as a tool to understand our ethical predicaments. In sharp contrast to Naiyāyikas belief Bhartrhari maintains:

“It is extremely difficult to establish by reasoning the nature of objects, because their properties differ according to difference in circumstances, place and time.”

<sup>9</sup> Therefore reasoning cannot yield to us any uniform, universal understanding about the objects in the world and therefore no corresponding knowledge regarding how to act towards those objects. Not only this: “Whatever is inferred with great effort by clever reasoners is explained otherwise by the cleverer ones.”<sup>10</sup>

To the contrary knowledge attained through tradition like skills is only further and further enhanced with the passage of time. It is never contradicted or disproved and does not know an end in time even as a theoretical possibility. Bhartrhari states: “The experts’ knowledge of the genuineness of precious stones and coins, uncommunicable to others, is born of practice and not of reasoning.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore Bhartrhari concludes: “One who has recourse to Tradition which shines uninterruptedly like the ‘I’ consciousness cannot be diverted therefrom by mere reasoning.”<sup>12</sup> Whether this last sentence actually follows from the previous ones or not, it is nonetheless a strong claim. What Bhartrhari seems to mean here is that tradition is an *a priori* element in all our judgments like ‘I’ consciousness where all judgments have to belong in order to have unity of apperception. Reasoning on the other hand being contingent upon particular conditions and circumstances can never supersede the authority of tradition. Thus *vyavasthā-nityatā* or unbroken flow of tradition ensures the existence of the original beginningless pure form of grammar and knowledge of that alone on Bhartrhari’s account can ensure a correct linguistic understanding of the Vedas. It should be pointed out here that reasons adduced by Mīmāṃsakas in favor of authority of tradition are not entirely of the same kind as Bhartrhari. Mimamsaka’s insistence on the exclusive authority of the Vedas with regard to *dharma* is based on his belief in human inability to know independently what is right or wrong. According to him, human beings have sense perception as the

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. verse 28.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. verse 31.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid verse 32.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid verse 34.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid verse 35.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid verse 41.

most authoritative source of knowledge but most of the judgments that concern our ethical predicaments are extra-sensory. For instance our senses do not tell us what would be the right course of action in a given situation because an ordinary human being cannot look into the future instances. "In particular there is no direct knowledge of what effect an action will have at a future time – perhaps after death – hence, of its value to the agent, i.e. whether it is ultimately conducive to heaven or prosperity." (Ślokavarttika, Pratyakṣa, 26-32). Most of the arguments adduced by Mīmāṃsā writers are indirect in nature. According to them we should believe in the authority of the Vedic words because of the sense of conviction with which they were originally received never diminishes while all other means of knowledge are questionable. Conversely, Vedic judgments are not negated by human judgments based on their reason, conscience or sentiments because we know that as human beings we are fallible in our use of these faculties. Vedic sentences or tradition on the other hand has an appearance of impersonal objectivity. Their credibility is enhanced by their lack of contingencies that attaches to other judgments. Vedic words are in a sense immediately there as seemingly timeless commands not belonging to a particular individual or group of people but as a part of the timeless historicity of our being.

Thus to sum up there are three main strands of ideas regarding the word and its meaning found among the Classical Indian schools of philosophy. First suggestion regarding this comes from Bhartrhari according to whom language has a purely natural form which is prior to us but due to corrupting influence of time (*kāla*), we need the help of tradition to get back to the original form. Thus meaning generating process under this scheme is far from dialogical. Second suggestion comes from Mīmāṃsakas who believe that the job of the words is not to describe the way the world is but rather to produce right inclination in the subject in consonance with *dharma* which is already inspired in the words of the Vedas. Here again relation between the word and meaning is not a subject of human negotiations. It is already preordained therefore the role of reason again is not come to consensus regarding what kind of world we want to be but rather its role is merely philological and scholastic. The Nyāya School present an interesting case in this regard. According to them we live in an un-liberated state because we do not have knowledge of the actual nature of things. When we are confused about or ignorant of the actual nature of things then we act towards them in wrong way which further results in results unintended by the doers. This finally results in human misery and bondage. Therefore we must enquire into the actual nature of things. This way overall the Nyaya School is much more positive and optimistic about the philosophical and logical role of reason. They imagine a world with three co-ordinates of language, knowledge and the objects. These three co-ordinates have a direct congruence with other. Therefore to know the actual nature of things we should go into an enquiry into the language because that is our only window to the world. This school looks closest in spirit to the role of reason envisaged by Habermas among the three schools we have examined so far. But Naiyayikas further argue that all the objects in the world have an essential nature (*svabhāva*). They present themselves along with their actual nature. This could subsequently mean that the world has an essential structure too. But if this is so then the task of the philosopher is reduced to giving us a correct picture of the world. Therefore their task is not to argue about what kind of world we want to rather live in but rather what kind of world we are actually living in.

Thus the hermeneutical gap between the language and the world that post-Heideggerian hermeneutics assumes is not assumed and available in Nyāya scheme of things.

Further, purity of linguistic understanding along with the uninterrupted flow of tradition where it has to be located, leads to many questions. The idea of *Vyavasthānityatā* that Bhartrhari has presented to us looks monolithic, sacrosanct and too self-referential. Any such theory would hold only on the assumption that “there is indeed a single mainstream tradition; that all valid works participate in it; that history forms an unbroken continuum free of decisive rupture conflict and contradiction and that the prejudices that we (who?) have inherited from tradition are always to be cherished. It assumes that in other words, history is a place where ‘we’ can always and everywhere be at home; that the work of the past would always deepen rather than say decimate our present self-understanding; and that alien is always secretly familiar.” History for Bhartrhari “is not a place for struggle, discontinuity and exclusion but a continuing “chain”, an ever flowing river, almost one can say a club of like-minded.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in Gramscian’s inquiry seems to be triggered by the same old concern that propels most of the philosophers of language, namely the possible and often observed misunderstanding in language. Bhartrhari seems to think that it happens because through the passage of time we tend to lose our grasp over the pure and pristine form of grammar usage (*vyākaraṇa*) and we must consult or learn the original primitive use of grammatical rules from the cultured few to prevent it.

But Bhartrhari if looked at closely turns to ontology in order to avoid any theorization of language which builds upon viewing the world in terms of objects that language merely serves to name. He finds an alternative to this objectification by postulating a prior correspondence or rather an organic conceptual unity between the language potency or language principle and the world which is absolutely prior to any understanding of or in language. But the point one should not fail to notice here is that in the act of establishing what is prior to the world of objects and to the human understanding of that world, Bhartrhari irrevocably reifies language. Bhartrhari while treating language as completely an objective transcendental principle, rather than as a product of interaction among people which is both logically and factually the presupposition of language, chooses to gloss over certain problems that any such view of language might involve. As Ricoeur quotes Marx in his *Rule of the Metaphor*, “language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse” with other people<sup>14</sup>. He further states - “Language is only the locus for the articulation of an experience which supports it and... everything consequently does not arrive in language but only comes to language.”<sup>15</sup>

One should note here that Bhartrhari’s postulation of language principle as prior or transcendental to specific relations in the human community glosses over the fact that one’s access to language and the content of one’s discourse are themselves shaped by existing relations of power as suggested by Habermas.

<sup>13</sup>Eagleton, Terry, as cited by Gerald Burns in *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992, p.195.

<sup>14</sup>cf. Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor*, Toronto University Press, Toronto, 1979.

<sup>15</sup>Ricoeur, Paul, “Ethics and Culture: Habermas and Gadamer in Dialogue”, in *Philosophy Today* 17(1973), p.162.

Thus, my main observation regarding Bhartrhari's notion of *Vāk* or Mimamsaka's notion of *apauruṣeyatva* as the ultimate linguistic *a priori* is that there seems to be here an omission to ask who historically has been entitled to participate in what he calls continuity of tradition (*vyavasthā-nityatā*) or beginningless authority of Vedic words which locates any ontological discourse including the ethical, and whether its content justifies ideologically particular interests in the historical world. Further, the point that Bhartrhari and Mīmāṃsakas seem to be making with regard to authority of Vedas vis-à-vis timeless flow of tradition can be understood with the help of the following passage from Gadamer's *Truth and Method*:

We stand always within a tradition, and this is no objectifying process, i.e. we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always a part of us, a model or exemplar, a recognition of ourselves, which our later historical judgments would hardly see as a kind of knowledge, but as a simplest passage of tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore one of the reasons for granting supremacy to tradition over other means of knowledge is that it can never be an object of reflection. Our language being already structured through tradition the influence of the latter over the former cannot be extricated, it can though be explicated. On such orthodox account of tradition, we are always a participant as long as we move within a natural language and we cannot step outside it as a reflective partner. There is therefore no general criterion ever available to us which would allow us to determine when we are subject to false consciousness of a pseudo-normal understanding under the influence of unexamined tradition and consider something as a difficulty that could be resolved by rational means through what Habermas calls communicative action. Therefore a modern reader of Bhartrhari and Jaimini would be at a loss to understand as to how they preclude the possibility of conscious or even subliminal distortions within the apparently smooth surface of tradition which could prevent us from a reasoned out understanding of the real and the actual. The so called passage or 'continuity of tradition' (*vyavasthā-nityatā*) may already be guided by conscious attempts to set it adrift towards a pre-conceived end. To diagnose and eradicate such possibilities one needs to act as an observer outside the passage of tradition as suggested by Habermas in his theory of communicative action. My submission here in this context is that any universal claim of linguistic understanding through tradition as we saw above is argued by some major orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, can only be maintained if it is realized that the context of tradition as a focal point of possible truth and factual agreement could as well be at the locus of factual untruth and continued force. My further contention is that given the skepticism regarding the role of reason vis-à-vis Vedic tradition in Mīmāṃsā and Bhartrhari's philosophy, there is no possibility of imaging a lifeworld under these systems. Even in Nyaya philosophy which shows a certain level of commitment towards role of reason, the hermeneutical gap between the language and the shared expression is not available. Nyaya philosophy presupposes that all the objects in the world are

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<sup>16</sup>Gadamer, Hans Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. N. Kemp Smith, Macmillan London, 1953. p.250.

available for understanding along with their immutable essence. If the nature of world is already defined for us then the task assigned to reason would be more cognitive rather than communicative in nature in the Habermasian sense of the term. Thus the kind of social ontologies that could possibly emerge from the tenets of the above discussed schools of Indian philosophy could never be of the nature of the lifeworld since there is no possibility of communicative actions under the tenets of these thought systems.

One might wonder at this point – so what if there does not seem to be much scope for communicative action and lifeworld in orthodox Indian thought systems. My submission in response to such queries would be that the task of a historian is not only to study history as a series of discreet moments as events big or small, significant or not so significant in themselves. The task of a historian also involves to look at events in time not only for their impact and penetration in time but also for their lateral or horizontal continuity in time. One needs to look for events in time that are not always so explicit in nature. One of the very distinctive features of Indian society and polity is its diversity. Religions and ethnic diversity has provided richness of its culture on the one hand and has also provided it various challenges to grapple with on the other. A strict sense of hierarchy that has always prevailed in Indian society is amongst one such issues. Social roles based on caste and gender and different stations in life have always been viewed as essentially self-enclosed and un-negotiable. ‘Brahmin-ness’ (uppermost bastion in Hindu hierarchy) is considered a *jāti* (word interestingly used both in the sense of caste as well as essence/category) residing in the person belonging to that caste according to Nyāya system. One of the most revered Hindu scriptures like Mahabharata has an anecdote apart from several others where education is denied to a young talented boy named Eklavya because he does not belong to the Kshatriya caste which is decided on the basis of one’s worth rather than her worth. Such notions and perceptions have survived in Indian society several decades after independence. By presenting an analytic study of orthodox Indian thought systems, my purpose is to draw the attention of scholars of Indian philosophy to look for the epistemic links between Indian past and present and to enquire further into epistemological reasons for the genesis of this hierarchy and its tenacity to continue to remain a part of Indian society even today. The importance of this issue can be gauged from the fact that it was an important point of contention even between Gandhi who declared himself to be a Sanatani Hindu and several social reformist of that time including Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Narayana Guru. In an interesting debate between Narayana Guru and Gandhi sitting under a banyan tree in Kerala Narayana Guru challenged Gandhi’s adherence and support to Varna hierarchy in Hinduism. While Gandhi was of the opinion that there are inherent differences amongst human beings therefore fourfold hierarchy of Varna in Hinduism is justified. Following passage from well known publication on Modern Indian History would be helpful:

A conversation between Gandhiji and Narayana Guru is significant. Gandhiji, in an obvious reference to Chaturvarna and the inherent differences in quality between man and man, observed that all leaves of the same tree are not identical in shape and texture. To this Narayana Guru pointed out that the difference is only superficial, but not in essence: the juice of all leaves of a

particular tree would be the same in content. It was he who gave the call — ‘one religion, one caste and one God for mankind’...<sup>17</sup>

It becomes clear from analogy used by Gandhi in the above passage, that even in modern times notions like caste get their life sap from some of the essentialist epistemological propensities, which have their roots somewhere in orthodox Indian thought systems. It is also interesting to see how and why Ambedkar chose Buddhism discarding his Hindu identity by saying – “Even though I was born in the Hindu religion, I will not die in the Hindu religion”<sup>18</sup>. Buddhism through the ages has presented a challenge to the essentialism represented by Indian orthodox systems through their notion of dependent origination. Buddhism reduces the notion of essences to mere notions, surmises about identity of an object which are contextual, relative and extraneously dependent. Within such framework of causality no definite essence can be granted to any object concerned. It could be noted here that the biggest philosophical support to caste system comes from Purusha Sukta of Rig Veda where the cause of entire human race is surmised to come from Purusha whose different parts of the body lend essences to different varnas amongst humans. Thus human identity in terms of its origins comes from its course whose essence continues to be in the effect. Buddhism challenges such notions of essence and identity and creates a possibility of more flexible epistemological postures for more flexible notions of identity. One could also note here that almost all of the published works on history of Indian philosophy are accounts of metaphysics and epistemology of those systems. Accounts of ethics propounded by the same very schools are published in separate volumes. No significant efforts have been spared towards showing any continuity or link between these two spheres or study by scholars of Indian philosophy. With several breakthrough now available explicating the link between epistemology, metaphysics and ethics presented by western social scientists, a new space for study of some of the ancient philosophical ideas presented in different parts of the world now seems available. This paper is a humble attempt at hinting at such possibility. I do not though claim absolute originality here in terms of my scholarship on Habermas. Some scholars on Habermas have already attempted to contextualize Habermasian scholarship to particular societies and polities of the world. Important amongst them could be the attempts made by Tom Bailey<sup>19</sup>, Peter Losonczy<sup>20</sup> among others. But these scholars too have only attempted to give a Habermasian analysis of the current socio-political situations which differs widely in terms of methodology and main focus of the problematic. My overall proposal in this paper is that explication of epistemological core of some of social problems that continue to haunt Indian polity today could provide the social scientists important clues to new proposals regarding solutions of these problems.

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<sup>17</sup> Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan, K. N. Panikkar, *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947*, Penguin Books, 1989, p.86.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt\\_ambedkar\\_conversion.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_conversion.html)

<sup>19</sup> Bailey, Tom. *Deprovincializing Habermas: Global Perspectives*, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Losonczy, Péter and Rathore, Aakash Singh. *Discursing the Post-Secular: Essays on the Habermasian Post-Secular Turn*, Reihe: Schnittpunkte - Intersections, 2010.