

The Concealed Art of The Soul

*Theories of Self and Practices of Truth
in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*

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Words That Break: Can an Upaniṣad State the Truth?

Twofold, verily, is this, there is no third, viz. truth (*satya*) and untruth (*anṛta*). Therefore in saying ‘I now enter from untruth to truth’, he passes from the men to the gods. Let him then only speak what is true.

Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 1.1.1.4–5a

The oblique path—it was called the ‘path to truth’.

Nietzsche

In the work of thinkers belonging to the school of Advaita Vedānta, attention is given to a problem importantly related to the question we have been considering, the question of how authors of protreptic texts intend them to be read or received. The problem refers to an apparent contradiction between vehicle and content. If the Upaniṣads really do say, as the Advaitins claim, that it is erroneous to conceive of the world as a diversity, that all difference is an illusion, then they themselves must be illusions too; but if the Upaniṣads are *illusions*, they can *say* nothing.¹ And, indeed, it’s not hard to find Upaniṣadic passages seeming to say exactly that:

With the mind alone must one behold it:
There is here² nothing diverse at all!

¹ The problem does not arise in quite this form on the Mādhyanika view that there is only an analogy, and not a strict identity.

² *neha nānāsti kiṃcana*. The preceding verse speaks of ‘the breathing behind breathing, the sight behind sight’, which would suggest that the reference of ‘here’ is the self or brahman. Advaitins construe it as referring to the whole world. Formally, then, the argument that this verse proves the Advaita claim suffers from *petitio principii*, for it requires us to know in advance that the whole world is identical with brahman. The *iha* ‘here’ in BU 4.4.19 seems to me an excellent example of the phenomenon Aloka Parasher-Sen describes in terms of ‘texts within which were left open spaces for interpretation’. See my Preface.

From death to death he goes who sees
Here any kind of diversity.

(BU 4.4.19)

To the allegation of performative incoherence, Maṇḍanamiśra (c.675–725 CE), on behalf of the Advaita position, responds with a defence of what I will call the *procedural* use of reason. Reason, it is argued, is able to sustain the inquiry even of an inquirer who is in a position of massive error (or global concealment of the truth as we might more felicitously put it). The running theme of this book has had to do with the identification of deep errors in one's thinking about self, as well as with the proper methods for their removal. The Advaitins locate the deep error in a false conception of the individuation of selves; the Buddhists in the very application of the concept of self. Maṇḍana argues that reason does afford a 'way out' even from within. We will see, however, that a strong critique of procedural reason is presented in the work of two other philosophers, Kumāṛila and Rāmānuja.

5.1 False vehicle, true content: Maṇḍanamiśra's examples

I begin with the following question. What is it that makes reasoning something of value, a virtue? One answer, indeed the standard one, is that reasoning is valuable because truth is preserved or transmitted across arguments. If truth-preservation is what makes reasoning valuable, then reason's proper interest is in the shared properties of truth-preserving arguments, in other words, in validity as a formal property of argument-schemes. In some quarters of the Indian debate, however, there is a persistent demand to locate the virtue in a different property of reason—argument should not merely *preserve* truth but also *promote* it. One advocate of that view is Maṇḍanamiśra, the influential early Advaita Vedāntin.³ Maṇḍanamiśra wants reason to extract or filter the true from the false.

³ His career was in Mīmāṃsā, and he is the author of several important Mīmāṃsā texts, including the *Bhāṇaviveka* and the *Vidhiviveka*, upon which the polymath Vācaspatimiśra wrote his *Nyāyakaṇikā*. Vācaspati also wrote a commentary, now lost, on the *Brahmasiddhi*, and attempted a harmonization of Maṇḍana and Śaṅkara. See A. W. Thrasher, *The Advaita Vedānta of Brahma-siddhi* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993). Hajime Nakamura suggests that in the earlier phase of Advaita 'he seems to have been a Vedānta scholar equal in authority to Śaṅkara'. Hajime Nakamura, *A History of Early Vedānta Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, Part 2, 2004), p. 189.

Indeed, Maṇḍanamīśra raises a question of outstanding epistemological importance, one that is pressing not only for the adherents of Advaita Vedānta, but for all philosophers who share with them a certain conception of the ends of philosophy. I believe that we can learn a great deal about the nature of epistemological inquiry from a careful examination of Maṇḍana's argument. I hope, in particular, to show how a procedural or algorithmic conception of inquiry is importantly different from more commonplace epistemological theories. Maṇḍanamīśra begins with what is a familiar puzzle. If the Upaniṣads and other Vedāntic texts teach that all is in reality a single, simple unity, and that the apparent world of plurality and difference is an illusion of the senses,⁴ then those texts themselves, as an articulated part of the apparent world of differences, are illusory too. In that case, their testimony is not dependable. In other words, the assertions of the Upaniṣads are pragmatically self-defeating: their truth undermines the warrant they afford for believing it. To this common charge, Maṇḍana responds as follows:

Some people say that a belief in the Vedānta undermines itself (*svayam eva vyāhata*). Without difference, [they say] one cannot understand difference, for it is comprehended precisely by means of difference; and so it is self-defeating to say that non-difference is understood insofar as difference is eliminated.

We reject this argument. The acquisition of knowledge requires that there is a method, but not that the method is 'real in itself' (*paramārtha*). For the truth can be known even by way of an erroneous belief (*mithyājñānād api tattva-pratipatteḥ*).

(BS p. 41, l. 11–15)⁵

How might someone come to acquire knowledge of *brahman*, when that knowledge consists precisely in a recognition that there is no such thing as difference, that all is one? It will seem that the only effective procedure in the acquisition of such knowledge takes at face value the teachings of the scriptures, specifically here the Upaniṣads as they are interpreted by Śaṅkara and the followers of his school of Advaita Vedānta.⁶ Yet—and here we find

⁴ Or, if one thinks that the senses present only raw particulars and no differences, as indeed Maṇḍana does (BS p. 71, l. 1–2), then the illusion is a product of the mental constructions one puts upon the raw perceptual data.

⁵ Page and line numbers refer to the following edition: *Brahmasiddhi by Maṇḍanamīśra, with Śaṅkhaṇḍī's commentary*, ed. S. Kuppuswami Sastri (Madras Government Oriental Manuscripts Series, no. 4, 1937).

⁶ As I have noted earlier in this book, this is not the only possible interpretation of the Upaniṣads. The puzzle we are considering is one that is internal to Advaita Vedānta.

ourselves in a dilemma—we must admit either that those various Upaniṣads do really exist, each with its various stanzas, each one of which is composed of words, words themselves composed of syllables, and so that there are real differences; or, if not, then we must admit that the person seeking to acquire knowledge of *brahman* has at least to *believe* that the recited Upaniṣads exist in a structured form capable of giving testimony, and so that a false belief is necessarily implicated in the procedure that leads to knowledge.

The first option is what motivates the charge against Advaita Vedānta of self-refutation: the method by which the so-called ‘knowledge’ is produced requires for its possibility the negation of what is claimed as true. This is, we might observe, a peculiar inversion of Kant’s transcendental method of proof, under which the truth of a certain proposition, for instance the existence of space, is argued to be a condition on the possibility of experience. Here we have what might be termed a transcendental method of *refutation*, in which the truth of a proposition *not-p* is argued to be a condition on the possibility of the belief that *p*.⁷ It is important to observe that it does not follow from such a method of argumentation that *p* is false: what does follow is that knowledge of *p* is impossible. For either we do believe that *p*, in which case *p* is false, or else *p* is true and we cannot believe it. What we cannot have is a *true belief* in the proposition.⁸

It is for good reason, then, that Maṇḍana chooses to defend the second horn of the dilemma. False belief, he claims, can be instrumentally implicated in the manufacture of knowledge.⁹ The ‘source text’¹⁰ for that claim is Īśā Upaniṣad 11:

Truth (*vidyā*) and error (*avidyā*)—he who knows them both together passes beyond death by untruth, and by truth attains immortality.

⁷ One might recall here the idea of a preparatory condition, introduced in chapter 1.

⁸ For an interesting study of the role of transcendental methods of argumentation in Indian epistemology, see Dan Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁹ This thesis is explicitly denied by many classical and contemporary epistemologists. Gail Fine, for instance, uses *Meno* 75 c8–d7 to attribute to Plato the view that ‘knowledge must be based on knowledge’; see her *Plato on Knowledge and Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 226ff. See also Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 78: ‘[A] true belief essentially based on false beliefs does not constitute knowledge.’ It is denied too by those who espouse a ‘no false lemmas’ condition on knowledge; see Gilbert Harman, *Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

¹⁰ I prefer ‘source text’ to ‘proof text’ here, for reasons indicated in the Preface. With one exception, our authors do not cite the early texts as proof of their views, but as evidence that the view is consistent with the tradition. The exception, of course, is if the claim being made concerns the text itself.

Maṇḍana explains:

The two, truth and error, are related in a means-ends relation. Without error, there is no means to truth.

(BS p. 13, l. 5–6)

In the course of explaining Īśā Upaniṣad 11, Maṇḍana advances two distinct accounts of how it might be that error is instrumental in the pursuit of knowledge.¹¹ I shall call his two accounts the ‘residue’ theory and the ‘immanence’ theory. The residue theory claims that certain false beliefs have a particular causal capacity, the capacity to destroy other false beliefs and then to annihilate themselves. Maṇḍana offers, by way of analogy, the power of certain chemicals to dissolve other chemicals before dissolving themselves, or again antidotes, which eliminate other poisons in the body before themselves disappearing. What remains as a residue is the truth:

Truly then, nothing that is brought into being lasts for ever, and so he said ‘by error, death.’ What this means is not that error is the method of establishing the truth, but rather that error is also destroyed by means of the error whose mark is hearing, for example, [the recited Upaniṣads]. So error is said to be death.

(BS p. 13, l. 6–8)

Error, in other words, kills itself; or rather, one error kills all. In the last chapter, we looked at two examples of a residue theory: the Buddha, in likening his own teachings to an emetic, put forward a residue theory; and so did Āryadeva, when he said that false beliefs ‘burn up’ false beliefs, including themselves. Maṇḍana, however, does not endorse this theory, and perhaps for good reason. For, after all, it rests on the optimistic idea that error has an innate dispositional tendency towards mutual annihilation and self-destruction, and that leaves it vulnerable to the objection that it leaves no room for a normative truth-seeking practice. It requires of us only that we wait around for error to blow itself up and so fails to give determinate

¹¹ As with comparable terms in Greek, the word *asatya*, a derivative of the verb *as* ‘to be’, connotes both untruth and unreality. Thus to say that the Upaniṣads are *asatya* is to assert any one of three things: that they are unreal, that the belief in them is untrue, and that they are real but what they say is false. This vehicle-content distinction will become important later. Similar care must be taken with other Sanskrit synonyms for ‘error’, such as *avidyā*. For detailed discussion of Maṇḍana’s theory of error: Lampert Schmithausen, *Maṇḍanamiśras Vibhramavivekaḥ, mit einer Studie zur Entwicklung der indischen Irrtumslehre* (Vienna: Hermann Bohlaus, 1965); Srinivasa Rao, *Perceptual Error: The Indian Theories* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), pp. 103–8.

shape to a *quest* for truth. An analogous criticism has been pressed against the conception of political practice in Marxism, which sees capitalism as already containing the seeds of its own destruction, a conception that leaves the political practitioner with no more than an ancillary role in the struggle for political change.¹²

The immanence theory claims instead that knowledge is immanent in error:

Another meaning [of Īśā Up. 11]—There is no error without some truth. Even a perception of difference is not devoid of illumination, for in its absence no difference is illuminated ... The truth whose mark is hearing [the Upaniṣads speak] about oneness is not free of error, for it is bound up with such distinctions as exist between hearer and hearing, and so on.

(BS p. 13, 11–17)

That is to say, even within error, there is an embedded truth; the presence of truth is a precondition for the possibility of error. And if indeed there is truth ‘in’ error, then one way to make sense of the idea that error can lead to truth is to think that the element of truth that is immanent in a false belief might be in some way *operative* in guiding the believer from error to truth. Maṇḍana explores this idea in the continuation of the passage we have been examining on Īśā Up. 11. Later in the *Brahmasiddhi*, he will explore another possibility, that a corrective procedure can extract the truth that lies within an error. Proceeding first with the idea that it is the true ingredient in a false belief which is operative in the manufacture of further beliefs, Maṇḍana introduces a series of famous examples (not all his own):

[Objection:] If all is one, then diversity is false, and so reflection upon it and hearing about it are false too. So how can they take place, and to what effect? Moreover, an apprehension of what is true derived from the false is in fact an error (*asatyāc ca satya-pratipattir mithyaiva*). An example is the apprehension of smoke as a result of fog misperceived.

[Reply:] There is no law that what is untrue can have no effect. Magic tricks cause fear and delight. The false can produce something true. Here are two

¹² So argues the political theorist G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); see also Thomas Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure, and Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 109. Ironically, Marx himself seems to have been sceptical about the therapeutic philosophy of the ancients for similar reasons; see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 36–8.

examples: a drawing of a *gavaya* [which shows us what this cow-like animal looks like, but isn't itself one], and written letters [which show us the corresponding sound, but don't make it].

[Objection:] In and of themselves, these things are real, not void; but those who think that all is one hold that the means of reaching the truth are in and of themselves false.

[Reply:] In and of themselves, they are real, but as *signs* they are false. [They pretend to be something they are not.]

[...]

[Objection:] A drawing of a *gavaya* doesn't cause one to apprehend [itself, which is] something other than a *gavaya* as a *gavaya*; nor written letters the sounds. Rather, it is through resemblance: 'This [drawing] is like a *gavaya*!' And the letters work through the convention, 'Seeing this written letter, one should recall this sound.' [So there is no falsity involved here at all.]

[Reply:] That contradicts everyday opinion. A child is taught the written letters as *being* sounds, and in ordinary life no difference between them mentioned. Someone says, 'This is a *gavaya*,' and the listener replies, 'I have seen a *gavaya*.'

Furthermore, it is not a mistake to infer that a reflected object is at a particular place, on the basis of a reflection, which [being a reflection] is untrue. It is not a mistake to understand a particular meaning from words which, though really eternal, are falsely broken into long and short syllables.

Again, an imaginary snakebite can be the cause of death, and it is no mistake to deduce the death from it, any more than from a real snakebite happening at a particular place and time.

(BS p. 13, l. 19–p. 14, l. 15)

What Maṇḍana is trying to do here is to show how something that is illusory, phoney, or fake can nevertheless be instrumental in the production of knowledge. The drawing of an animal can instruct us in the shape of the real thing; letters written in a phonetic script can serve to indicate the sound of the pronounced word. The respondent points out that, for a proper analogy with the alleged status of the Upaniṣads, we must have a case in which an unreal vehicle of representation is falsely believed to be real, and the content represented believed to be true (cf. my note above about the term *asatya*). The examples of the written letters and the drawing seem, on the other hand, to be cases where the vehicle is real, but the content false. Maṇḍana suggests that there is in each of these cases an element of untruth—we do in some way identify the sign with the signified, the picture with the real thing. I point at someone's picture, and say, 'That

is her!’ He seems to think that these cases are assimilable to the category of the illusion, claiming that in both cases we suffer under an illusion to the effect that the drawing is really the animal, or the written letters really are the word. These two cases were ones that other Indian philosophers had already used and discussed.¹³ In the event that this defence of them as proper examples is not found convincing, Maṇḍana tries two more, the cases of the phoney snakebite and the reflection. These do seem to have a better claim to be cases where an unreal vehicle is believed to bear a true content.

Yet there remains an ambiguity in Maṇḍana’s description and it is one upon which he trades. Does he suppose that we are conscious that the image is only an image, the drawing only a drawing; or does he take it that we really are victims of a deception? The example of the person who, mistakenly thinking they have been bitten by a snake, nevertheless falls into a swoon and dies, suggests that the examples are meant to be regarded in the second way, as does Maṇḍana’s insistence on the identity of sign and signified. The problem with that is that there is no general reason to suppose that the victim of such a deception is going to be led towards the truth, rather than further into error. Someone who does not realize that the object they see before them is only a reflection will not go in the right direction, any more than the person who really does think that the line-drawing is the animal. It would seem from these examples that error does lead to truth, but only when it is in some sense *recognized* as error. The prisoners in Plato’s cave could indeed learn quite a lot about the real world by observing the shadows, but only if they have come to recognize the shadows *as* shadows.¹⁴ If it is philosophy that is to be their guide, then we must ask: to what extent can this reorientation be the product of the application of reason?

¹³ The case of the written letters is to be found in Kumāṛila, *Ślokaṁvārttika* 5.3.155–9; and in Śaṅkara, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* under 2.1.14, but without elaboration. Śaṅkara also mentions the case of the phoney snakebite. Compare also Śaṅkara 4.1.3: the Vedic texts are indeed unreal.

¹⁴ J. L. Austin argues that ordinary reflected images should not even be described as illusions: ‘No doubt you *can* produce illusions with mirrors, suitably disposed. But is just *any* case of seeing something in a mirror an illusion, as he [Ayer] implies? Quite obviously not. For seeing things in mirrors is a perfectly normal occurrence, completely familiar, and there is usually no question of anyone being taken in.’ *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 26.

5.2 Of fire, fog and fallacy: Śrīharṣa meets Gettier

The example of a person who mistakes fog for smoke, and then infers to the presence of fire, is an important one in Indian epistemology. It too looks at first sight to be a case where a real vehicle (the fog) represents falsely, but might also be described as a case in which an unreal vehicle (the illusion that there is smoke) represents truly. Its first appearance in the Indian literature seems to have been with the Vaiśeṣika philosopher Praśastapāda (c.530 CE). He uses it to illustrate a particular sort of inferential error, one he calls *tadbhāvāsiddha* ‘unestablished as is’. Exemplifying this sort with the case of someone who, ‘while alluding to fog, wishes to prove the presence of fire from that of smoke’, Praśastapāda says that the evidence is ‘not established as having the form of smoke’.¹⁵ Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on, or formally define, the fallacy. The same example, however, is also known to several later philosophers, including two of Maṇḍana’s time, the Buddhist Dharmakīrti (c.600–660 CE) and the Mīmāṃsaka philosopher Kumārila (c.640 CE), as well as later Vedāntins including Śrīharṣa (c.1125–1180 CE).¹⁶

Kumārila says that ‘the truth is not reached by way of what has only the appearance of truth’ (ŚV 5.3.159), and he relates this point to any attempt to derive an ‘ultimate truth’ (*paramārtha-satya*) from the merely ‘worldly truth’ (*saṃvṛti-satya*); this latter, he also argues, is just another name for the false in any system that postulates ‘two truths’. I will discuss Kumārila’s view in more detail later in this chapter.

Dharmakīrti uses the example slightly differently. He thinks about a situation in which one is simply not sure if one is seeing smoke or fog, and nevertheless attempts to infer that there is fire. The attempt will fail, because there is a confusion with respect to the nature as ‘its own’ (*svayam*) of the evidence. I take it that he thinks this is so even if it is *in fact* smoke that one is perceiving. That seems, at least, to be the force of his comment:

¹⁵ Praśastapādabhāṣya [PB], §270: *tadbhāvāsiddho yathā dhūmabhāvenāgnyadhigatau kartavyāyām upa-nyasyamāno bāṣpo dhūmabhāvenāsiddha iti*. I use the enumeration of the text in Johannes Bronkhorst and Yves Ramseier, *Word Index to the Praśastapādabhāṣya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994). They note that this sentence is omitted in two of the twelve editions of the text they survey; a proper examination of the mss. is required conclusively to determine that it is not a later interpolation.

¹⁶ Exact chronology is difficult, but Dharmakīrti, Kumārila and Maṇḍana fall in roughly the same century. Legend has it that Maṇḍana was Kumārila’s brother-in-law and pupil; but this is doubtful. For a survey of the available facts: Thrasher, *The Advaita-Vedānta of the Brahma-siddhi*, Appendix A. The dates for Śrīharṣa follow Granoff (below).

As for instance, [adducing] a general material thing, covered with the form of fog or whatever, in proving fire.

(NB 3.73)¹⁷

Although the passive of the verb *sandih-* ‘to cover, to smear’ can mean either ‘to be confused’ or ‘to be confounded, mistaken’, and so could just conceivably refer both to the case of *mistaken* identification and to the case of *indefinite* identification, the commentators take it to refer only to the latter. If the person is unsure whether it is indeed smoke they are seeing, and nevertheless goes ahead (insofar as that is possible) and attempts to infer the presence of fire, then that is an inferential error.¹⁸

Śrīharṣa’s discussion, is, however, of a different order of sophistication. He emphasizes the fact that the conclusion might well be both true and the result of an apparently well-attested process of knowledge-formation, namely rational inference. He sees this as causing difficulties for the most influential theory of knowledge (Udayana’s). In a passage of crucial importance, he first of all considers the case of a belief¹⁹ that is true by chance:

The definition of knowledge (*pramā*) as a non-mnemonic committal mental state or episode (*anubhava*) of the way things are (*tattva*) over-extends and covers beliefs which are true but [purely by chance], as in the maxim of ‘the crow and the palm tree.’²⁰

Another example: someone, closing five shells in his palm, asks, ‘How many shells are there?’ The person who has been asked the question says, ‘five,’ as per the

¹⁷ *yathā bāṣpādi-bhāvena sandihyamāno bhūtasamghāto ’gnisiddhāv upadiśyamānaḥ sandighāsiddhaḥ*. P. Peterson (ed.), *The Nyāyabinduṭīkā of Dharmottara to which is added the Nyāyabindu* (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, 1889), p. 112.

¹⁸ Bhāsarvajña (c. 950 CE) too, describing the case as a ‘fallacy due to uncertainty’ (*sandighāsiddha*), says that it involves an indefinite discrimination. *Nyāyasāra with Nyāyabhiṣaṇa*, ed. Yogindrananda (Varanasi: Ministry of Education, 1968), p. 312.

¹⁹ It is with caution that I sometimes use the word ‘belief’ as a substitute for terms like *jñāna*. Indian ontology of the mind is not accurately described in terms of the notion of belief, if that implies standing dispositional states of mind. It would be more strictly accurate to talk consistently about ‘mental episodes’ or ‘cognitions’ or ‘apprehensions’. Too much precision of that sort, however, leads quickly to unreadability, and is necessary only in contexts where the distinction matters. There are also those who deny we should use the term ‘knowledge’ in describing the Indian theory (but then, we might ask, ‘the theory of what?’); and, as is well known, there have even been those who have said the same about the term ‘philosophy’ itself. Translations of words are like machine components: both have tolerance margins.

²⁰ A popular maxim, illustrating inexplicable coincidence: the crow alights in a palm tree at just the moment when its ripe fruit happens to fall, killing the crow. See Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 265–8.

maxim of ‘the goat and the sword.’²¹ Then both the speaker and the respondent think that there are five shells.

Instances such as this are there to be seen. The expression ‘the way things are’ can’t rule out this belief (*jñāna*), because there is no lack of accordance: the number five circumscribes what is actually the case.

Nor is it ruled out by the expression *anubhava* [implying *not a memory*], for it does not come after another such state, so the defining mark of recollection is not present.

Nor can they say that what results is just a doubt (*saṁśaya*: *p* or *not-p*?), lacking in commitment (*niścaya*), with only one side of the doubt articulated for the same reason that one finds in the practice of cultivation [one sows the seeds, uncertain but assertive that they will grow]. That’s because there must be only a pretence of certainty in one of the two sides of the doubt; for otherwise, we would make the mistake of thinking that a doubt is the conjunction of two certainties [*p* and *not-p*!].

Perhaps what is needed is a qualification [in the definition], to the effect that knowledge must be produced by such a cause as is ‘faithful’ (*avyabhicāri*; nondeviant). That can’t be right, though, for it would make the expression ‘the way things are’ superfluous. If one wants to maintain that the belief that is as per ‘the crow and the palm tree’ is produced by a complex of causes that are collectively ‘unfaithful’, the unwelcome result would be that even the ‘unfaithful’ is true (*yathārtha*), because there is [still] no distinction among the causes [of the true].

Nor can it be right to say that this ‘accordance with how things are’ is without any cause, for in the absence of any restricting principle (*niyāmaka*) there would be a serious over-extension [of the definition]. So, given that this ‘faithfulness’ is needed, one has to say that the instrumental cause [of knowledge] is indeed subject to a principle of restriction to what is ‘faithful’.

‘So what is then [this restriction to what is “faithful”]?’ You must give an answer to this question yourself, an answer that shows either how to include this [luckily true] belief within the [somehow] restricted domains of knowledge, or else how to delimit the general definition of knowledge.²²

The possibility of the true guess seems to show that ‘true awareness’ or ‘true belief’ alone is not sufficient for knowledge. Adding the further

²¹ Another popular maxim, illustrating an action’s accidental and unintended effects: the sword is accidentally dislodged by the goat’s rubbing against the post on which it is balanced; it falls and cuts the goat’s throat. See Doniger O’Flaherty, *Dreams*, p. 266.

²² Śrīharṣa, *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhāḍya*. B. Dvivedi (ed.), with Śīromaṇi’s *Bhūṣāmaṇi* (Varanasi: Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, 1990), book 1, chapter 16: pp. 241–4. See Stephen H. Phillips, *Classical Indian Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), pp. 164–73, for selected passages from chapters 17 and 20–2.

condition, ‘produced by a faithful cause’ seems promising, but there are serious difficulties with the proposal. If it is meant to introduce a distinction *among* the causes of true mental states, so that we can say of some that they are not caused in the right way, then we cannot define a ‘faithful’ cause simply as one such as to produce as true beliefs. This is Śrīharṣa’s challenge to traditional Indian theories of knowledge. It presented the tradition with a considerable difficulty, and would contribute to the emergence of a new Indian epistemology, the Navya Nyāya.²³

Śrīharṣa goes on to argue that chance can be involved even when the belief is the result of one of the standardly approved sources of knowledge. The text continues as follows:

So too, it is possible that what merely appears to be the sign leads to an ascertainment of the signified in a place where, as chance would have it, the signified is present, either alone or with the sign. And there, even if as regards the mere appearance of the sign there is no knowledge (*pramā*), nor as regards the place it is located with the signified, nevertheless, as thus characterised [in the person’s mind], the knowledge-hood (*prāmāṇya*) of the ascertainment has to be accepted, with respect to its being about the signified, for example, fire, either on its own or with a different sign. So there is no way to escape the fault [in the theory of knowledge] mentioned above.

Śrīharṣa identifies two places where a defect has crept into the inferential process: the person has misidentified the evidence, taking what is in fact fog to be smoke; and they have also misascribed it to the mountain, for there isn’t (necessarily) any smoke on the mountain. The misascription is, of

²³ In an earlier book, I suggested that the new solution is to say that the restricted causal principle is ‘normal functioning of a process of such a type as generates true beliefs in normal conditions’. In a review, Stephen Phillips argued that this will not do. His reason was that the additional causal principle *is* truth-entailing, but ‘generates true beliefs in normal conditions’ is not. The full statement of the principle I offered is, as a matter of fact, truth-entailing (I was not, however, sufficiently clear in my earlier book that this is the principle to which the token use of the term *prāmāṇya* should attach; Indians do also use the term to refer to the type itself). More recently, Phillips has said that ‘[a] cognition that was only accidentally truth-hitting in a certain instance would belong to a type that could not be relied on’. I think that we are now in agreement, but the problem remains, to answer the question Śrīharṣa says needs answering: What is the principle of typing, the ‘restricting principle’ (*niyāmaka*)? Gaṅgeśa, on whom Phillips bases his remarks, has a quite strange view: he defines ‘knowledge’ as any true mental episode, but he seems to be using the term in a technical sense (see n. 24). See my *Semantic Powers: Meaning and the Means of Knowing in Classical Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999b), pp. 63–72; Stephen Phillips, ‘Review of Ganeri’, *Mind* 110 (2001): 749–53; and ‘Introduction’ to Stephen H. Phillips and N. S. Ramanuja Tatacharya (trans.), *Epistemology of Perception: Gaṅgeśa’s Tattvacintāmaṇi* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2004), pp. 10, 183–6. See also Patrik Nyman, ‘On the meaning of *yathārtha*’, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33 (2005): 553–70.

course, a consequence of the misidentification: once the fog is mistaken for smoke, then whatever is believed to be true of the fog will be taken to be a truth about the smoke. Still, the two beliefs, that *this* is smoke, and that there is smoke on the mountain, are distinct; and both are mistaken. Given the second belief as premise, it would indeed be rational to infer to the presence of fire, and, *by chance*, Śrīharṣa says, there is indeed fire on the mountain. In his sceptical persona, Śrīharṣa does not assert that the inference does not in fact lead to knowledge; his point is that the epistemological theory under discussion cannot agree that it is knowledge, and so the theory is defeated *on its own terms*. Śrīharṣa, indeed, thinks this is true of *all* theories of knowledge; he claims only to use others' epistemological criteria against themselves.²⁴

Do we have in Śrīharṣa, or in the other philosophers I have just mentioned, an anticipation of Edmund Gettier?²⁵ Gettier's examples seem to show the justification of a true item (state, episode, event, condition) of the mind is not sufficient for that item to be knowledge. In Gettier's cases there is a disconnection between the circumstances that make for truth and the circumstances that make for justification: I have a false but justified belief that Jones owns a Ford, and a true and justified belief that Jones either owns a Ford or is in Barcelona (he drives by in a borrowed car on the way to the airport). To some, it has seemed that what these cases show is that knowledge cannot rest on a 'false lemma'.²⁶ I infer that Jones either owns a Ford or is in Barcelona from the false lemma, namely, that Jones

²⁴ For further discussion of this last point: Phyllis Granoff, *Philosophy and Argument in Late Vedānta: Śrīharṣa's Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 4–30, 144–6. Matilal argues, following Gaṅgeśa, that the mistaken inferrer does know, but does not know that he knows (*Perception*, pp. 137–40). He does know, because 'know' is used by Gaṅgeśa in the technical sense of any 'truth-hitting cognitive episode'. He does not know that he knows because 'his inference, his evidential support, has not been faultless'. This does not, however, really address the problem: first, because our interest is not in any technical use of 'know' but in our actual concept of knowledge; and more particularly because, if we are using the technical definition, we must use it for 'knowledge of knowledge' too; but there is no reason why the mistaken inferrer should not cognize truly that he has a true cognition.

²⁵ Edmund Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge', *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121–3. The question was first raised by B. K. Matilal, *Perception*, pp. 135–6. See also Sukharanjan Saha, *Epistemology in Prācīna and Navya Nyāya* (Kolkata: Jadavpur University, 2003), pp. 59–70, as well as my 'Review of Saha', *Philosophy East and West* 57.1 (2007), p. 120–3.

²⁶ Gilbert Harman, 'Knowledge, inference and explanation', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 5 (1968): 164–73 at p. 164. See also his *Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). Harman notes that there are purely perceptual Gettier cases, such as when it looks to one as if there is a candle in front of one, an appearance which, though veridical, is caused by a reflection in an intervening mirror. Harman concludes that all perception involves inference.

owns a Ford. It is not entirely clear, however, if any of the Indian theories operate with a notion of justification that would entitle us to call one of the above examples a 'Gettier case', although they certainly have the form of a counter-example to the sufficiency of an analysis of knowledge. The Indians do not typically say that what these examples show is that I am in an inferentially justified and coincidentally true mental state. What they say is that I have *tried* to infer, but have done so unsuccessfully. There has been, as we might say, a 'performative misfire' in my attempted act of coming to know. The notion of a 'performative misfire' is due to J. L. Austin.²⁷ He says a couple might go through all the motions of getting married, but fail to do so for various reasons. One reason, which he calls a *misinvocation* of the ceremony, is simply that one of the couple is already married, and so it is impossible for the performance to succeed, however well it is otherwise conducted. It might even be the case that both parties think, mistakenly, that the performance has been successful (the member of the couple who is already married wrongly believing, for example, that the old marriage has been annulled). That is how the 'fire-fog' case will be described—there is an attempt at the performance of an inference, an attempt that fails because the person involved mistakenly thinks that a condition on the successful performance of the inference has been met, whereas in fact it has not (the condition here being the one identified by Śrīharṣa, that there is smoke on the mountain). The 'ceremony' of inference has been misinvoked.²⁸

That works for Praśastapāda, but still leaves Dharmakīrti. In his example, the condition *is* met (or at least could be): the problem is that the person doing the inferring *isn't sure* whether it is met or not. So another condition on inferential success is needed: that a person attempting an inference ascertain that all the conditions on successful inference are met. The inferential failure involved in Dharmakīrti's example is what Austin calls an *abuse*. One can't sincerely go through the ceremony of marriage if one is unsure whether one is already married or not.

There is, however, a danger for those philosophers, Praśastapāda and Dharmakīrti included, who want to classify all such cases as ones of inferential failure. The danger is that the criterion chosen to exclude them will be *too draconian*, and end up wrongly excluding plenty of perfectly

²⁷ J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn, 1975), pp. 14–18.

²⁸ I develop the 'infelicities' approach to the study of logic and epistemology in a work in progress, *Knowing as an Act of Mind*.

viable cases of inferential success as well. The same danger is there for the ‘no false lemmas’ theory. If one says, for example, that any uncertainty at all with respect to the evidence is enough to bring about an inferential malfunction, then that would run the risk of excluding the case in which I mistake what is in fact wood smoke for coal smoke, for example. That’s surely wrong: I can perfectly well infer to the presence of fire in spite of this mistake. I think we must take seriously Prāśastapāda’s use of the phrase ‘*tad-bhāva*’, and Dharmakīrti’s of ‘*svayam*’; the implication is that the mistake or uncertainty in question must concern the identification of the thing as ‘what it is’ or as ‘its own’. Mistaking wood smoke for coal smoke is not a misidentification of that sort, but mistaking fog for smoke is.

Perhaps this permits us to reach a better understanding of Maṇḍana’s idea that when an element of truth is immanent in an error, the error can lead us to the truth. Consider again, for instance, the example of the image reflected in a mirror. There *is* truth mixed up with error in this reflection, even for the perceiver who does not realize that what they see is merely a reflection. For although the reflection misleads with respect to the location in space of the object reflected, it does not mislead with regard to its shape, colour, and other intrinsic properties—what it is in itself. A person who comes to believe that the object is a green vase has acquired a piece of knowledge *in the midst* of an error. In an analogous way, knowledge of the unity of the cosmos might be acquired in the midst of erroneous belief in the existence of real plurality:

In and of themselves, the means that lead to an appreciation of non-difference are not in error, for what they are in and of themselves is just brahman. So the means by which one reaches brahman is just brahman, bound up with error. It’s just the same with written letters, like ‘This is a “*k*”’ or ‘This is a *gavaya*’—they do make known the sounds even though the form is erroneous.

(BS p. 14, l. 4–6)

Later Buddhists refer to the case in which a fire is being used to cook some meat for an offering. Although the fire has not as yet produced any smoke, the cooking meat attracts a swarm of flies which look from a distance to be a plume of smoke. Examples of this sort suggest that the conditions on performative ‘inferential misfire’ need to be slackened still further. For what should we say if, as in this example, the circumstances are such as to ensure that the misidentified evidence is necessarily correlated with that which

it is misidentified? It is then not *by chance* that the inferrer hits the truth, even if it involves an element of luck.²⁹ There is even a circumstance in which the inference-from-fog example will fit this model of operative truth embedded in error. That is the circumstance where the fog is a by-product of the heat of the fire. Now we can, again, say that the truth itself—namely that there is a fire—is guiding the belief that there is a fire, because if there had been no fire, there would have been no fog, no fog misperceived as smoke, and so no inference back to fire. This seems to be an almost exact analogy for what Maṇḍana wants to say is the relation between knowledge of *brahman* or non-difference and an erroneous but instrumentally necessary belief in difference.

5.3 Reasons and causes

Reason demands that when beliefs are in conflict, an adjudication is made. In the Indian texts, one belief is said to have the greater ‘strength’ (*balatva*). We have been discussing a situation in which the testimony of the Upaniṣads is in conflict with the perceptual evidence of the senses. At the beginning of the chapter in the *Brahmasiddhi* on reasoning (*tarka*), Maṇḍana responds to the objection that here perception, and not scripture, is stronger, because the acquisition of knowledge through testimony ‘depends on’ (*apekṣā*) prior perception of both words and world (both in hearing the text recited and, before that, in learning the meaning of the words involved in correlation with perceived objects in the world). With admirable clarity, Maṇḍana distinguishes between the notions of *reason* and *cause*, and observes that causal priority does not imply logical or evidential priority:

Even though dependent on the earlier awareness as its cause, the later awareness is seen to be stronger.

(BS p. 41, 4–5)

Strength is an epistemological notion; the English idiom would speak rather of one cognition ‘having greater weight’ than another (it is curious that, in

²⁹ A good discussion of the place of luck in knowledge acquisition is Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

both languages, metaphors of force are used to provide a *contrast* with the causal idiom). Maṇḍana is surely correct both to disentangle the two senses in which cognitions might depend on one another, and to point out that a subsequent cognition can carry greater strength or weight than its necessary causal prerequisites. Of course, this is exactly the situation when error leads to truth. Maṇḍana provides two illustrative examples. In the first, an initial misperception contributes to the the observer's ability to see clearly what is going on. Initially misperceiving the legs of some elephants as posts (or, possibly, tree trunks), one comes to see that there are in fact posts there, albeit far away:

For example, in the case of some distant posts, the awareness that there are posts [is stronger] than the perceptions of elephants, even though the perceptions of the elephants is needed as a cause in the perception of the posts. Sensory connection alone does not produce this perception, because at the first moment it is absent. Nor is it the product of [going to] a particular place, because it arises even when staying put. So, in the case of posts standing at a distance, what one should think is that the mind is focussed and joins the senses in friendship with the mental traces left by the preceding mistake.

(BS p. 41, l. 5–10)

A clearer example, though, is his second one. One becomes aware that there are twenty of something, beginning with an initial awareness that there is one, then two, and so on (BS p. 41, l. 10–11). In the *Sphoṭasiddhi*, Maṇḍana uses this same example to illustrate the process by which the supposedly erroneous perception of individual words leads to a correct grasp of the unitary sentence meaning,³⁰ and he stresses the importance of temporal sequence. Perhaps the idea is that the initial error is cleared up, not by approaching closer, but by watching carefully over a period of time: the things initially taken to be elephant legs do not move. Temporal sequence as an essential ingredient in a corrective procedure seems also to be the point of the example of numbers. Here, I think, the idea is that one is trying to ascertain the number of objects of a certain sort in a particular place and the process involved is one of counting. One judges 'here is

³⁰ The discussion here refers to Bhartṛhari, *Vākyapadīyavṛtti* 1.87–90. Bhartṛhari is a sentence holist, regarding words as fictional abstractions not having a meaning of their own. Sentence meaning is logically prior to word meaning, but the listener must hear the string of individual words first, before grasping the meaning of the sentence.

one', but on noticing a second, corrects one's first judgement with the new judgement 'there are two'; and so on. The process of making and then correcting an error continues until there are no more objects of that sort in the vicinity, at which point one's judgement acquires stability. Provided that the person counting is sufficiently diligent and observant, the process ends with the judgement 'there are twenty' precisely because there are indeed twenty such objects: if there had been another one, it too would have been counted. Presumably this is why the later judgment 'there are twenty' has greater epistemic strength than the earlier judgement 'there are two'—it is stable over time in the mind of a properly attentive person. The example of counting helps to make clear why an initial error should be thought necessary as the means to the ascertainment of truth.

Maṇḍana does not distinguish between two rather different ways to understand the 'error leads to truth' thesis. A stronger reading affirms that error is a necessary step in the path to truth; a weaker version of the thesis will claim only that there are ways to reach the truth given the fact of error. Maṇḍana is, I think, committed only to the weaker reading, for it is his overall purpose to show that the brute fact of our colossal error about the reality of difference is no bar to our coming to know the truth, that all is one. The idea that the truth is immanent in error permits one the hope that a suitably refined and well-attuned corrective procedure will lead from error to truth. Perhaps there is a faint analogy in the scientific method of successive approximation, a process that leads to the truth via a succession of steps, each of which, being only an approximation, is false.³¹

5.4 How to lever oneself into the truth, given the fact of colossal error

Maṇḍana's epistemology is procedural and first-personal. That is to say, he begins with the assumption that each one of us is massively in error,

³¹ F. H. Bradley seems to have something akin to a procedural conception in mind when, at the very end of *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 487, he says: 'We want to know, in effect, whether the universe is concealed behind appearances ... And to this, in general, we may make an unhesitating reply. There is no reality at all anywhere except in appearance, and in our appearance we can discover the main nature of reality.' Error, according to Bradley, is partial truth, the result of seeing only some of the whole and from a particular point, rather than seeing them 'from the centre' (p. 172)—the way a Vyāsa might.

and then he seeks to find the resources that each of us has available, by means of which one can 'lever oneself up' into the truth. For the Vedāntin, epistemology is meant to answer the question: how, *from within*, to reach the truth, given the fact³² of colossal error? This is a legitimate project of inquiry, but it is instructively different from many standard conceptions of the nature of epistemological inquiry (or the role of philosophy in achieving wisdom). It will not fit either into a foundationalist or a coherentist conception. Foundationalism searches for a domain of self-evident truths, as well as for methods to move with certainty from those truths to others. Its way of coping with error is that of Descartes—if I cannot tell which of my beliefs is true and which false, then let me put them all in doubt and start afresh. Coherentism finds a larger place for the elimination of error, but it does so by way of a method that tests for consistency and inconsistency in the body of belief. The procedural epistemology of Maṇḍana and others will be happy, however, with the idea that the body of ordinary belief is already largely coherent; the problem is that, although coherent, it is also massively false. Procedural epistemologists are happy, indeed, to speak of 'two truths', or perhaps better, two 'standards of epistemological warrant' (see also §6.4). The body of ordinary belief, precisely because it is mostly coherent, works well enough in ordinary circumstances; it is, they will say, 'true at the level of the conventional' or the everyday (*vyavahāra-sat* or *saṃvṛti-sat*). Their epistemological project is a different one. It is to discover the means by which one can lever oneself out of such a body of largely adequate belief, given the fact or on the assumption that this body of belief is nonetheless massively erroneous. Procedural epistemology is a philosophical defence of the possibility of such a project. It is important to stress that the defence does not rest on the claim that error is phenomenologically distinguishable from truth. The defence depends on a subtler idea, that a properly constituted algorithmic procedure that is sensitive to and guided by the way things *in fact* are will lead from error to truth. In other words it is, to use the contemporary jargon, a first-personal but externalist conception of the

³² For the Vedāntin, that's about all that can be said about it: the fact of colossal error is described as *anirvacanīya*, 'inexplicable', 'indeterminable' or, simply, 'that about which there is nothing more to say'. According to Robert Nozick, many philosophical problems have the same structure: How is X possible, given certain other things which 'apparently exclude' X? See his *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 9. Here, the fact of colossal error apparently excludes truth-directed inquiry.

project of epistemology. That makes it radically different from many of the epistemologies on the market.³³

An illustrative example might be developed out of Leibniz's resolution to Molyneux's question.³⁴ Molyneux asks if a person blind from birth and acquainted with objects of various shapes only by touch, will, if their sight is restored to them, recognize and distinguish those same objects through sight alone. The problem is in part to do with the acquisition of concepts of space and spatial extension, where although the means by which those concepts are acquired is linked to one particular sense modality, the concepts themselves are not intrinsically sensory. Leibniz argued that the blind person does indeed acquire through touch an understanding of spatial and geometrical arrangement, an understanding that can then be applied in a priori reason to the visual. What makes this possible is the real structure of space itself. The procedural epistemologist will say of Molyneux's example that although the blind person inhabits an entirely tactile world, and to that extent lives in error about the true nature of things, their purely tactile acquaintance with the world nevertheless provides sufficient grounds by which, through reason, they can lever themselves into a more properly objective conception.

The critic will wonder if the blind person really does 'live in error'—by what necessity must we suppose that the purely tactile conception of the world, on the one hand, and the objective conception of it, on the other, are not simply compatible and equivalent ways of conceiving, different levels of description, of a single common world? This remains the central challenge for the epistemology of the 'two truths', to justify the value-judgement that one truth is 'higher' and 'ultimate' (*paramārtha*), while the

³³ Many of the writings of K. C. Bhattacharyya can be read as attempts to formulate a procedural epistemology. The self, he says, consists in freedom from error; indeed, in an echo of the Upaniṣadic conception discussed above, he says that the self as freedom resides in a 'feeling of feeling'. K. C. Bhattacharyya, 'The subject as freedom', reprinted in his *Studies in Philosophy* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1958 [vol. II]). George Burch comments that, according to Bhattacharyya, 'we attain subjectivity or freedom, and ultimately absolute freedom, by progressive rejection of the false or illusory in favour of the true or real. The method is cognitive; the end, freedom, is presumably truth.' George B. Burch, 'Search for the absolute in neo-Vedānta: the philosophy of K. C. Bhattacharyya', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1967): 607–67; reprinted as the 'Introduction' to K. C. Bhattacharyya, *Search for the Absolute in Neo-Vedānta* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1976), p. 27.

³⁴ For recent discussions of Molyneux's question: Naomi Eilan, 'Molyneux's question and the idea of an external world', in Naomi Eilan et al. (eds) *Spatial Representation: Problems in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 236–55; Gareth Evans, 'Molyneux's question', in his *Collected Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

other is at best a ‘concealment’ (*saṃvṛti*) or a ‘convention’ (*vyavahāra*), and at worst an ‘error’ (*mithyā*) or ‘illusion’ (*māyā*). It seems to take for granted that our ordinary beliefs, especially about ourselves, are deeply in error, or at least, can be substantially improved.

5.5 The critique of procedural reason in Kumāṛila and Rāmānuja

Two Indian realists, Kumāṛila (fl.660 CE) and Rāmānuja (c.1050–1139 CE), both present criticisms of the very idea that reason has a procedural use. Kumāṛila, like Praśastapāda and Dharmakīrti, thinks that the type of inference the ‘fire-fog’ example is meant to exemplify is fallacious. His discussion falls within an intricate refutation of idealism in the ‘nirāmbanavāda’ chapter of the *Ślokavārttika*. He argues that any attempted demonstration of idealism must appeal to premises the idealist himself or herself believes to be false. He then claims that no such demonstration is rationally compelling (either to its target audience, the realist, or to the idealist themselves):

[The idealist:] Perhaps I first established the conclusion by reasoning that is commonly accepted, even though [I see from the vantage point I reach that] it has no real basis? [Kumāṛila:] What is now revealed to have no real basis, how could it have had one before? And if not then how could it have [ever] proven anything? If it could prove anything, it must have had a real basis. Something unreal cannot prove something real, for [non-entities] like the hare’s horn have never been seen to establish a truth. It is an error to cognise fire from something like fog that isn’t smoke. So your idea of what is really true (*paramārtha*), since it is derived from a false premise (*asatya-hetu*), it too is false (*asatya*). Truth (*satya*) is not reached by way of what has only the appearance of truth (*satyābhāsa*).

(ŚV 5.3.155–9)³⁵

Fog has at most the ‘appearance’ of a good reason, in that it resembles smoke, and the belief in fire it appears to justify is therefore a ‘false’ belief. Why does Kumāṛila say that the ensuing belief is ‘false’? We have already

³⁵ Kumāṛila, *Ślokavārttika*. K. Sambasiva Sastri, (ed.), *The Mīmāṃsāślokavārttika with Sucaritamīśra’s commentary, Kāśikā* (Trivandrum: Trivandrum Sanskrit Series 90, 1926), pp. 78–9. Kumāṛila’s principal target is, presumably, the Mādhyamika *śūnyatāvāda*, but the argument abstracts from specifics and so is generalizable. I thank Robindra Martin Ganeri for help with these passages.

seen that it might very well be true—there may well be, by chance, a fire on the mountain. So Kumārila is not using ‘true’ and ‘false’ in their ordinary sense. In fact, Kumārila uses the terms ‘true’ and ‘false’ in a sense of appraisal, as when we speak of a ‘true friend’ or a ‘false floor’.³⁶ When he says that the ‘false’ is that which has only the ‘appearance of truth’, it is to be taken in the same sense as that in which we say a false floor merely resembles a floor.³⁷ Inferences based on phoney evidence are like convictions grounded in a fabrication of the facts; and we might speak of a ‘miscarriage of justification’ just as we do of a ‘miscarriage of justice’. The judgement in both cases is unsafe even if correct. Those philosophers who think that we are colossally in error, that there is a radical misrepresentation in ordinary experience—because experience represents the world as articulated by difference whereas in fact there is only unity—and yet who think that ordinary experience nevertheless provides us with the resources to lever ourselves into the truth, are similarly guilty of a miscarriage of justification. The procedural epistemologist will reply that the proper analogy is not with a miscarriage of justice, but with a witness who perjures himself or herself in court, and who does so not perfectly but in such a way that the perjury can come to light in the course of a process of cross-examination and cross-referencing with the testimony of others. The world is an imperfect perjurer, not a corrupt cop.

Kumārila’s commentator Sucaritamīśra brings the discussion back to a specific aspect of the problem at hand. At the beginning of the chapter refuting idealism, Kumārila has already tried to argue that what goes by the name of ‘concealing truth’ (*saṃvṛti-satya*) is in fact not true at all, but ‘false’ (*mithyā*) (ŚV 5.3.6).³⁸ Now he points out that someone who denies the reality of all distinction cannot very well help themselves to a *distinction* between two truths. That seems to be bad news for any procedural conception of reason:

³⁶ Alan R. White, ‘Truth as appraisal’, *Mind* LXVI (1957): 318–30; Robert Kirkham, *Theories of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), §10.3.

³⁷ As a Mīmāṃsaka, Kumārila is also a *svataḥ-prāmāṇyavādin*: he believes that genuine belief states are intrinsically true. It follows that for him, a ‘false’ state is something that only pretends to be a genuine belief state. See my ‘Traditions of truth: changing beliefs and the nature of inquiry’, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33.1 (2005): 43–54.

³⁸ For discussion of ŚV 5.3.6–10, see B. K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 153–4. See also Śāntideva BCA 9.2, and Prañākaramati’s commentary thereon, where Kumārila’s argument is rejected.

In your view there is no basis for a distinction between what is really true (*paramārtha*) and what is worldly (*loka*); how [then] is the real truth to be reached by means of the worldly?

(ŚV 5.3.166)

Sucaritamīśra's comment is very informative:

Besides, there is no basis for a division between what is really true and what is worldly, or conventionally true (*saṃvṛti-satya*), because that also refers to a distinction, and the cognition of it is [as of any distinction, for you] erroneous—this is the meaning of the sentence beginning 'what is really true.' Besides, if the worldly is the means by which the really true is reached, then it isn't really true, because it is reached by means of the worldly, just as in the case of fire and fog—this is the meaning of the sentence beginning 'the worldly.' Earlier [Kumārila] refuted the distinction between the truths. Now, he disputes the idea that the conventional is the means to the really true. Nevertheless, it is claimed by the followers of Vedānta that even from a conceptual illusion (*prapañca*), such as are the Upaniṣads, there is a determination of *brahman* in the shape of a dissolution of conceptual illusion. They say, among other things, 'There is a determination by way of the dissolution of the conceptual illusion of difference;' and again, 'Truth and error—he who knows them both together passes beyond death by error, and by truth attains immortality' [Īśā Upaniṣad 11]. What does this say? Brahman is the one whose form is truth (*vidyā*), the Upaniṣads and the rest have the form of error (*avidyā*). He who knows them both passes beyond the death that is marked by error, and goes to the bliss of *brahman* that is marked with the essence of truth. So it is claimed that from error indeed truth is obtained (*avidyāt eva vidyā-prāptir*). Is this then refuted by what we say? Our final view is that it is not the case that a conceptual illusion such as are the Upaniṣads, even though false, is the means for knowing *brahman*. For those things that are established by a proper means of knowing like perception are incapable of concealment (*apahnavā*); such as the individual self, which is established by the perception, 'I am it!'³⁹

Sucaritamīśra reminds us that we are specifically concerned with the problematic status of the scriptures, here the Upaniṣads, and their role in freeing individuals of a false view of self. For the Upaniṣads themselves are our method of knowing the real truth, that the world is undivided and unitary; and yet that truth itself implies that the Upaniṣads are 'false'. They are 'false' not because of what they say—indeed, what they say is that the

³⁹ Ślokavārttika, pp. 80–1.

world is unitary and undivided—but because of what they *are*, namely differentiated and articulated structures of sound. They are themselves a part of the illusion in which we dwell, if what they ‘teach’ is that we inhabit an illusion. Either the Upaniṣads are false, or else, if true, then false. So either way, they are false. This is not officially a paradox; it is a ‘protreptic argument’ in the Aristotelian sense.⁴⁰



The critique of procedural reason presented by Rāmānuja (a critique aimed at Śaṅkara, in the first instance) is very interesting. A procedural epistemology begins with the fact that we are massively in error about ourselves and the world we inhabit, that our ordinary methods of knowing either ourselves or our world, principal among which is perceptual observation, are corrupt. If, however, the only reason given for the global unreliability of the senses is that scriptures like the Upaniṣads speak of our erroneous misconception of the world as a diversity, then that reason will apply in equal measure to the Upaniṣads themselves:

Someone who is scared because he miscognises a rope as a snake does not lose his fear even when he is told that it is not a snake and that he should not be afraid, if those words are spoken by someone whom he thinks is in error.⁴¹

The argument that all is error because the scriptures teach that this is so implies an error in its own premise and so defeats itself. The function of the Upaniṣads is protreptic—they exhort the reader to reflect upon the unity of *brahman*—but in so upturning the mind of the reader, they also overturn themselves (p.118):

And indeed, the fact that the scriptures are rooted in error (*doṣamūla*) comes to be known at the very moment when they are heard recited, because the reflective thinking [that ensues] consists in a repetitive reflection about the oneness of brahman with the soul, crushing all the differences [between knower and known, word and sentence] that follow from the heard recitation.

⁴⁰ A. H. Chroust, *Aristotle: Protrepticus, A Reconstruction* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1964), esp. pp. 3, 48–9. The argument is called ‘protreptic’ because in its original form it is an exhortation to philosophy: either it is necessary to study philosophy, or it is not; if it is not, then it is; therefore, it is.

⁴¹ Rāmānuja, *Śrī Bhāṣyam*, M. A. Laksmīnāthaiah, chief ed., Melkote critical edition (Melkote: Academy of Sanskrit Research, 1985–91), vol. I, pp. 117–24; at p. 118. Cf. G. Thibaut, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary by Rāmānuja* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 48, 1904), pp. 73–8.

There is, then, a conflict between the testimony of the scriptures and the evidence of the senses, and no good reason to think that scripture is the ‘stronger’; perhaps there is no colossal error and so no work of ‘levering out’ for a procedural epistemology even to do. Where is the epistemological asymmetry that weighs in favour of the testimony of scriptures and against the evidence of the senses? Perhaps the asymmetry consists in this: the proposition that *brahman* is the sole unity is never defeated or contradicted by any other evidence, while the propositions of the senses are often defeated, or at least are potentially defeasible. To this, the astute response is that indefeasibility is not a criterion of truth, a response that Rāmānuja illustrates with a beautiful example (pp. 119–20):

Whatever has its roots in error is not ultimately real (*apāramārthya*), even if it is uncontradicted (*abādhita*). Here’s what we say.

Suppose that in some mountain caves, far away from other, normal sighted, people, there live a people who are afflicted with [the visual defect] *timira* [double-vision]. They are all ignorant of the fact that they have *timira*, and, because they are all equally beset with *timira*, they think without exception the moon to be double. There is never a defeating cognition here, but it still isn’t the case that this judgement isn’t false (*mithyā*)—indeed, the doubleness of the moon which it has as its object is certainly a false object. The eye-defect is responsible for the cognitions’ lack of accord with reality (*ayathārthajñāna*). Just the same is the [procedural reasoner’s] cognition of brahman, which, being rooted in misconception (*avidyā*), is certainly false along with its object, viz. brahman, even if there is no defeating cognition.

With the help of this elegant example, Rāmānuja presents a robust defence of a realist conception of truth; that there are, or at least could be, truths that are evidence-transcendent. Where Śrīharṣa argued that rational acceptability is not necessary for truth, since a belief can be true by chance, the claim now that it is not sufficient either—a belief might be false even in maximally ideal cognitive conditions. This thereby also rejects the indefeasibilist principle—that a statement which can never be defeated must be true—for the scriptural statement that *brahman* alone is real might be both indefeasible and false.⁴² To adapt our judicial metaphor, the ‘world’

⁴² The strongest advocates of the indefeasibilist principle (*svataḥ-prāmāṇyavāda*) are, in fact, the Mīmāṃsakas Śābara and Kumāṛila. Kumāṛila claims that self-knowledge is indefeasible (*Ślokavārttika*, *Ātmavāda* 133), as is the testimony of the Vedas. See John Taber, ‘What did Kumāṛila Bhaṭṭa mean by *svataḥ prāmāṇya*?’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112 (1992): 204–17.

might be a *perfect* perjurer, a perjurer who survives all cross-examination; or else, it might be a case of *mass* perjury, when the testimony of each witness is entirely corroborated by the equally perjurious testimony of every other.

Having questioned the presupposition from which a procedural epistemology begins, the presupposition that we are colossally in error, Rāmānuja begins his presentation of a critique of the idea of a procedural epistemology itself. We are, let us suppose, colossally in error; the scriptures that tell us this are themselves a part of that error; and yet even so they can help us lead ourselves out of error and into the truth—so goes the story. Rāmānuja refers to an analogy preferred by some procedural epistemologists, but not others. The objects about which we dream are unreal, and yet those dream states can be the cause of real knowledge; for example, when the dream is a premonition of a real future event.⁴³ The familiar response is that the analogy is based upon an equivocation of vehicle and content (a response already alluded to by Maṇḍana). Dreams are real mental events with false contents, and real entities can produce real effects. The misperception of a rope as a snake really does produce fear in the misperceiver. If what the procedural epistemologist claims is correct, however, then the scriptures are unreal entities with true contents! The Upaniṣad itself *qua vehicle* is not real, if what it states is true, namely that there is no real diversity. It would be as if (to return once more to my juridical metaphor) the jury were played a tape on which they heard the victim's voice saying 'Your Honour, that man did indeed murder me!' Even if the message on the tape is true, the nature of the medium should give us pause. What epistemological weight can we place on an oral document which *by what it itself says* betrays itself as phoney? Briefly reviewing in a similar manner all Maṇḍana's examples, Rāmānuja then concludes his presentation of the critique (p. 124):

It is, therefore, very hard to demonstrate that a cognition of brahman is true (*satya*) on the basis of the scriptures, which are [said to be] untrue (*asatya*).

Now perhaps one might say that the scriptures are not unreal in the way the sky-flower is, because they were viewed as real up until one came to think about non-difference and as unreal only when this thought arose. The scriptures are not, at this later time, the means of knowing brahman, consisting in pure consciousness,

⁴³ The analogy stems from Śaṅkara, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* under 2.1.14, a passage that is the main source for Śaṅkara's statement, rather less developed than Maṇḍana's, of the idea of a procedural epistemology. In the same passage, Śaṅkara refers to the case of the phoney snakebite and the example of the written letters (see above). Maṇḍana is cautious of the dream analogy, perhaps with good reason.

wholly without differentiation. When they *are* the means, the scriptures are, at *that* time, certainly real (*astī*), because they are viewed as real.

To this, we say that it is not so: for if the scriptures are unreal, then the view of them as real is false (*mithyā*). So what? A cognition generated by scriptures that are unreal is itself false, and so its object too, in this case [the existence of] brahman, is false. It's like this—because the cognition of fire generated by fog misperceived as smoke is false, so too is its object, the [existence of] fire, false.

Nor has it been established that [the existence of brahman alone] is indefeasible, because it can be defeated by a later statement, 'all is empty.' This later statement cannot be dismissed as being rooted in error, because you yourself have said that your statement ["Brahman alone exists"] has its roots in an error [namely, the Vedic texts themselves]. And, indeed, the later statement [just mentioned, namely 'all is empty'] might itself be said to be indefeasible!

Enough of this destruction of a quite groundless piece of bad reasoning! [i.e. the Advaita theory that one can come to know that brahman alone exists by way of the error that is the Upaniṣads.]

Powerful though it is, Rāmānuja's critique is not decisive.⁴⁴ It does not follow from the fact that the method of belief-formation is error-involving that the belief so formed, here that brahman alone exists, is false. What Rāmānuja's argument does is to lead us to a final clarification of the proceduralist's position. Perhaps, the suggestion goes, even if the scriptures are phoney, they can continue to have a protreptic and soteriological effect as long as the listener believes them to be genuine. Consider another kind of example: a fake painting might well be appreciated—and indeed might lead the viewer to that reorientation in their perception of the world at which good art is sometimes said to aim—just as long as it is *not* perceived as a forgery. The false art's appearance as true is a necessary precondition for its having a transformative effect on the viewer. Perhaps all transformation and all protrepsis depends in this way on an element of deceit and illusion, that the audience must 'enter into' the deceit if there is to be that reconfiguration of mind the writer, painter or teacher intends to bring about. If so, then the fact that the medium is a phoney is not, after all, sufficient to imply the falsity of its message, any more than one can

⁴⁴ For an elaboration and development of Rāmānuja's argumentation, see also the later Viśiṣṭādvaita thinker Vedānta Deśika (1268–c. 1350 CE); in particular vāda 30 of his *Śatadūṣaṇī*. See also S. M. Srinivasa Chari, *Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita: A Study Based on Vedānta Deśika's Śatadūṣaṇī* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999, revised 2nd edn), chapter 1.

conclude that there is no fire because the fog is misperceived. There are species of error (*mithyā*) other than untruth (*asatya*). The same response will be given to the objection pressed both by Kumārila and Udayana, that the proceduralist occupies a dialectically impossible position. Śrīharṣa, indeed, does exactly that.⁴⁵

This critique of procedural reason has helped us finally to disentangle the idea of a procedural epistemology from the idea simply of a valid inference with false premises and true conclusion. For in a procedural epistemology, the content born by an unreal and so ‘false’ vehicle is, in part, true, and the procedure is one in which the content is at least provisionally entertained as true even while the phoneyess of the vehicle is concealed. As I appreciate the painting, and allow its vision to upturn my soul, I shall perhaps in the course of that very process of transformation arrive at the ability to see the painting as a forgery—why should it matter so very much that it was an ‘error’ that led me to the truth?⁴⁶ The transformative rationality that the use of philosophy as therapy rests on is to be distinguished from the rationality of syllogistic argumentation.

The procedural epistemologist says that we are all as ‘blind’ as are the blind population in Rāmānuja’s example, but that our blindness does not prohibit us from *extracting* an objective conception of the world from a merely tactile and auditory acquaintance with it, as we saw in our discussion of Molyneux. All that we cannot do is to form any conception of how the world *looks* to a sighted person. But that is, after all, only another mode of sensory acquaintance, and there are many such ways the world might appear—that we cannot understand ‘from within’ the sonar world of the bat is not, of itself, a serious epistemological deficit. This, indeed, might be the reason why those sensory and other ‘conventional’ levels of conception should be regarded as levels of concealment or error, while the other is ‘higher’ and ‘ultimate’, a distant point of convergence, an invariant.

⁴⁵ For Udayana, see *Ātmatattvaviveka*, Dhundhiraja Sastri (ed.) (Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series no. 463–4, 1940), p. 283 ff. Śrīharṣa responds in the opening sections of the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhāḍya*. Similar points are made by Śāntideva BCA 9.106–17.

⁴⁶ Compare the defence Śrīharṣa gives. He says, for example, ‘How is it possible for [knowledge of non-difference] to be produced by the [supposedly unreal] Vedic texts? This objection would hold if the Vedic texts really [themselves] did produce it. But their efficacy resides in an error, and so is not in contradiction with a real inefficacy’ (p. 142). He concludes his discussion as follows: ‘Non-difference, which has somehow been taken hold of as the meaning of the Vedic texts that deny plurality, having itself become self-illuminating consciousness, amazingly extricates itself from argument and counter-argument pressing in from both sides’ (p. 146).

At the end, learning to *appreciate* the Upaniṣads as one might a work of art leads one to a reformation in one's relationship with oneself and the world, to a more objective, impartial view.

There remains a question about procedural epistemology that is not yet answered, and it is this. Does the procedure of levering oneself out consist in a process of 'triangulation', in which—to continue with the example of sense-experience—we cross-reference touch and sound, or sight and touch, in order to arrive at a conception of the world, and of ourselves within it, that is not *specific* to a sense modality, or indeed dependent on the senses at all? The Nyāya philosophers believe that such cross-referencing is the route to an objective conception of self, as we will see in the next chapter. But if that is right, then are we so sure that we are not as one whose access to the world is restricted to a single sense modality? Are we sure that our 'colossal error' is not *so* grave that even a procedural epistemology will be of no avail? There is a clear risk of instability in the very idea of a procedural epistemology, which while telling us we are colossally in error and yet that there is a way out, courts the possibility that the depths of that error will be understated, or turn out to be greater than even the proceduralist had imagined; and then there will be no path out, not even an oblique one. The Upaniṣadic self must not be *too* well hidden, the Buddha's teachings not *too* hard to understand; but what is there to reassure us that this is not indeed the case?

I will not, however, pursue the matter any further here. Instead, I want now to turn, finally, to an examination of various conceptions about self. These are the conceptions philosophers in India work extremely hard to develop out of the source texts. We have now looked both at the source texts and at the methods of development, and are finally in a position to consider the conceptions themselves. If the patient is to be cured, the doctor must understand both good health and the disease.