

Reconstructing Legal Hermeneutics through Mīmāṃsā: A Critical Philosophical Inquiry

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Theories of legal interpretation recognize multiple grounds of meaning, including text, context, structure, purpose, and coherence, yet disagreement persists over their relative priority when they generate competing interpretations. This article shows whether Mīmāṃsā Philosophy¹ can provide a distinctive way of addressing this problem. It critically reconstructs the Mīmāṃsā theory of interpretation through its six indicators - *Ūruti*, *LiEga*, *Vākya*, *PrakaraGa*, *Sthāna*, and *Samākhyā*- and argues that their significance lies less in the individual factors themselves than in their differentiated interpretive force. The article brings this framework into critical dialogue with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Dworkin's law as integrity, and Scalia's textualism. The comparison demonstrates that Mīmāṃsā offers a distinct perspective on interpretive priority: multiple interpretive reasons may be legitimate without possessing equal authority. The article develops this insight as ordered interpretive pluralism, suggesting that legal interpretation can accommodate textual and contextual plurality while remaining constrained by principled ordering of interpretive reasons.

Keywords: Mīmāṃsā; legal hermeneutics; interpretive priority; comparative jurisprudence; Indian legal thought.

Introduction

A systematic course of interpretation is the heart of any legal realm. No constitutional exegesis, statute, contract, policy regulation, or judicial precedent possesses a fixed, self-evident meaning; rather, their normative principles are understood only through interpretive discourses that connect the legal texts with evidential cases. Thereby, legal hermeneutics has been introduced as a primary concern of jurisprudence, aiming to explore how legal meaning is produced, validated and implemented (Gadamer, 2004; Hart, 2012). The hitherto existing confrontations among textualism, purposivism, originalism, and philosophical hermeneutics make clear that legal hermeneutics is neither a purely mechanistic process nor an unbounded exercise of judicial discretion. Rather, it demands a structured, concrete methodology that enables mediation among the text, legislative purpose, institutional authority, and the requirements of justice (Dworkin, 1986; Scalia & Garner, 2012). Existing debates among these theories, although highly sophisticated, over constitutional interpretation show that the requirement for a systematic framework of legal interpretation remains an unmet philosophical project.

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The following scholarship on legal hermeneutics has been developed within European and Anglo-American jurisprudential traditions. A group of theories, such as Hart's analytical exposition of jurisprudence (2012), Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (2004), Dworkin's interpretive theory of law (1986), and the textualism of Scalia and Garner (2012), have deeply influenced modern legal reasoning. These theoretical approaches have provided a constructive framework for the relationship among legal texts, institutional practices, and judicial exegesis. The important point is that the lion's share of legal discourse has been drawn from Western intellectual traditions. Still, a little space remains for non-Western traditions to shape the foundations of jurisprudential theories. Consequently, the so-called comparative legal philosophy has become Classical Asian interpretive traditions and pursues a post-anthropocentric type of tradition rather than a living philosophy resource enabling participation in contemporary debates (Menski, 2006).

As having a strong foundation in hermeneutic philosophy, the Mimamsa School of classical Indian philosophy occupies a unique position among these neglected non-Western traditions. Although this school is sometimes called the science of Vedic exegesis, it has developed sophisticated theories of textual interpretation in classical Indian thought (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990). This school is primarily dedicated to extracting the actual meaning of texts, resolving existing ambiguities and disputes among the verses and their given interpretations, and identifying the normative principles behind the sacrificial acts (Jha, 1933; Taber, 2005). The need to formulate interpretive principles was not only to explain the sacred texts but also to provide an analytical methodology for resolving internal disputes within them. In this regard, Mimamsa philosophy offers a constructive hermeneutical method which extends its domain beyond ritualistic practices. Despite its hermeneutical foundation, it has received little attention in contemporary legal discourse.

The present study argues that Mimamsa should be readdressed as a general legal theory rather than interpreted exclusively as a method of resolving conflicts in scriptural texts. The primary intention is that the exegetical framework articulated by Mimamsa provides a relevant conceptual resource for evaluating jurisprudential questions regarding textual vagueness and ambiguity, exegetical authority, and enduring contradistinctions among legal provisions. The study also seeks to explain the theoretical foundation of legal hermeneutics through a comparative philosophical analysis between the classical Mimamsa School and modern jurisprudence.

Methodologically, the paper adopts an analytical and comparative philosophical approach. It reconstructs the principal hermeneutical concepts of Mīmāṃsā through a critical reading of classical sources and places them in dialogue with selected contemporary theories of legal interpretation. By examining the convergences and divergences between these traditions, the study aims to demonstrate that Mīmāṃsā offers a comprehensive interpretive methodology that can contribute to contemporary debates in legal philosophy. The discussion proceeds by first depicting the fundamental problems addressed by legal hermeneutics, then revisiting the interpretive framework of Mīmāṃsā, and finally evaluating its relevance to advancing a more pluralistic and theoretically coherent account of legal interpretation.

The Problem of Legal Interpretation

Legal interpretation lies at the core of every legal system because legal texts rarely determine their own application without interpretive judgment. Statutes, constitutions, and regulations are framed in language that is often general, indeterminate, or open to multiple plausible

readings. Consequently, courts must continually decide not only what legal texts mean but also how their meaning should be determined. This has made legal hermeneutics one of the central concerns of modern jurisprudence, raising fundamental questions about the relationship between text, legislative authority, judicial reasoning, and the rule of law (Marmor, 2014). Although legal theorists broadly agree that interpretation is indispensable to adjudication, they remain deeply divided over the principles that should govern the interpretive process.

Among the most influential contemporary approaches is textualism, which holds that the authoritative source of law is the enacted legal text rather than lawmakers' subjective intentions or policy preferences. Modern textualists maintain that judges should interpret statutes according to their ordinary public meaning while resisting appeals to legislative history or extra-textual considerations that have not been enacted into law (Scalia & Garner, 2012). Textualism seeks to preserve democratic legitimacy by ensuring that courts remain faithful to the law enacted by the legislature rather than reconstructing it in accordance with judicial preferences. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that textualism itself is neither monolithic nor methodologically complete. Contemporary debates concern the role of semantic meaning, legal context, linguistic conventions, and the extent to which textual interpretation inevitably relies on background assumptions that extend beyond the statute's words (Manning, 2024). Consequently, textualism continues to face the challenge of explaining how judges should resolve ambiguity when the ordinary meaning of legal language is itself contested.

A second influential approach is purposivism, which argues that legal provisions should be interpreted in light of the objectives they were designed to achieve. Rather than treating statutory language as self-contained, purposivists maintain that interpretation should promote the underlying legal or policy purposes embodied in legislation (Barak, 2005). Contemporary theorists have refined this approach by distinguishing between legislative purpose, institutional purpose, and the objective purpose reasonably attributable to the statute as a legal instrument (Aalto-Heinilä, 2023). Such an approach enables courts to adapt legal rules to unforeseen circumstances while preserving the coherence of the legal system. Nevertheless, purposivism has been criticised for expanding judicial discretion by allowing judges to privilege perceived legislative goals over enacted statutory language. Critics argue that identifying statutory purpose often involves normative judgments that may vary across interpreters, thereby weakening legal certainty (Mancini, 2024).

Closely related is intentionalism, which holds that legislative intention is the primary determinant of legal meaning. According to this view, the legitimacy of legal interpretation depends upon fidelity to the intentions of those who enacted the law, making legislative history and drafting materials valuable interpretive resources (Alexander & Prakash, 2004). Although intentionalism appears attractive from the perspective of democratic legitimacy, contemporary jurisprudence has increasingly questioned whether collective legislative bodies possess a single, coherent intention that can guide judicial interpretation. Modern legislatures comprise diverse political actors whose motivations often diverge, making the reconstruction of a unified legislative intention both conceptually problematic and uncertain in practice (Marmor, 2014). Consequently, intentionalism struggles to explain how historical intentions should govern legal disputes arising under social and technological conditions that legislators could not have anticipated.

Beyond these methodological approaches, philosophical hermeneutics challenges the assumption that interpretation is merely the recovery of an objectively fixed meaning.

Gadamer's theory of understanding conceives of interpretation as a historically situated dialogue in which meaning emerges from the interaction among text, tradition, and the interpreter (Gadamer, 2004). From this perspective, legal interpretation cannot be reduced to either textual analysis or historical reconstruction, because the interpreter's historical horizon conditions every act of interpretation. Contemporary legal hermeneutics has drawn extensively on Gadamer's insights to emphasise that legal reasoning necessarily involves both application and understanding (Leyh, 2023). However, philosophical hermeneutics remains primarily a theory of understanding rather than a detailed methodology of adjudication. While it illuminates the interpretive character of law, it offers comparatively limited guidance regarding the systematic resolution of competing legal interpretations within institutional practice.

These competing theories have significantly enriched legal philosophy by illuminating different dimensions of legal interpretation. Textualism emphasises linguistic authority; purposivism foregrounds statutory objectives; intentionalism prioritises legislative intent; and philosophical hermeneutics highlights the historical and dialogical nature of understanding. Nevertheless, no single approach provides a comprehensive methodology for resolving situations in which these interpretive considerations conflict. Contemporary courts frequently encounter cases in which the ordinary meaning of statutory language, legislative purpose, constitutional values, and historical intention point to different interpretive outcomes. Existing theories therefore continue to disagree not only about the proper source of legal meaning but also about the relative priority of competing interpretive principles.

This continuing disagreement reveals a deeper methodological problem within contemporary legal hermeneutics. While existing theories identify important sources of legal meaning, they provide no universally accepted framework for establishing an interpretive hierarchy, reconciling textual conflicts, or ensuring methodological consistency across difficult cases. These unresolved questions invite a broader comparative inquiry into alternative traditions of interpretive reasoning. It is precisely at this point that the *Mīmāṃsā* tradition becomes philosophically significant. Its elaborate hierarchy of interpretive principles, systematic methods for resolving textual conflicts, and sophisticated account of normative authority offer conceptual resources that have remained largely absent from contemporary jurisprudential debates. The following section therefore reconstructs *Mīmāṃsā* not merely as a tradition of Vedic exegesis but as a systematic theory of legal interpretation capable of addressing enduring methodological challenges in legal hermeneutics.

Reconstructing *Mīmāṃsā* hermeneutics: Toward a theory of interpretive priority

The preceding discussion has established that contemporary legal hermeneutics lacks no interpretive resources. Modern jurisprudence recognizes a plurality of considerations through which legal meaning may be determined, including textual meaning, linguistic structure, statutory context, legislative purpose, historical background, and systemic coherence (Dworkin, 1986; Gadamer, 2004; Marmor, 2014; Scalia & Garner, 2012). Textualism gives substantial weight to enacted language and public meaning; purposivism attends to the objectives embodied in legislation; intentionalist approaches examine legislative intention; and structural approaches consider the relationship between individual provisions and the larger legal instrument. The central difficulty, therefore, is not simply identifying which considerations may legitimately enter interpretation. It is

determining their relative interpretive authority when they point towards competing conclusions. As the preceding section demonstrated, contemporary jurisprudence continues to debate how textual, purposive, contextual, historical, and structural considerations should be ordered in difficult cases.

It would consequently be misleading to claim that Mīmāṃsā possesses interpretive factors absent from Western jurisprudence. Contemporary legal interpretation already recognises analogues of textual indication, linguistic connection, context, structural position, and designation. The distinctive significance of Mīmāṃsā lies elsewhere. Its contribution is not primarily categorical—that is, it does not consist in supplying new types of interpretive evidence—but architectural. Mīmāṃsā develops a systematic account of different interpretive indicators and, crucially, of their relative evidentiary force. The philosophical question therefore shifts from *which considerations are relevant to interpretation* to *how competing interpretive considerations should be ranked, reconciled, or subordinated*. It is this second-order problem of interpretive priority that makes Mīmāṃsā particularly relevant to contemporary legal hermeneutics.

Historically, Mīmāṃsā developed as a discipline concerned with interpreting authoritative Vedic texts and, more specifically (Roy, 1992), determining the normative significance of Vedic injunctions. Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* begins its inquiry with *dharma*, understood through the authority of Vedic injunction, while Ūbara's commentary and subsequent Mīmāṃsā thinkers develop increasingly elaborate principles for determining how textual statements generate normative relations (Jaimini, *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* 1.1.1–5; Sabara, *Ūbarabhāṣya*; Roy, 1993). Contemporary philosophical scholarship has shown that this tradition developed a highly systematic account of prescriptions, prohibitions, obligations, and conflicts among normative requirements (Freschi & Pascucci, 2021). Freschi, Ollett, and Pascucci likewise characterise Mīmāṃsā as providing an unusually detailed analysis of statements possessing deontic force and of the principles governing normative action (Freschi et al., 2019).

The significance of Mīmāṃsā for jurisprudence should nevertheless be stated cautiously. Mīmāṃsā was not a theory of modern legislation, constitutional adjudication, or judicial review. Its original field was the interpretation of Vedic normative discourse. The present argument is therefore reconstructive rather than historical. It does not claim that classical Mīmāṃsā anticipated modern statutory interpretation in its institutional form. Rather, it asks whether the underlying logic of Mīmāṃsā's interpretive methodology can serve as a conceptual resource for contemporary jurisprudence, particularly for the ordering of competing reasons for interpretation. This distinction is important because the historical connection between Mīmāṃsā and jurisprudence in India is itself well established: Dharmaśāstra and Mīmāṃsā were closely connected, with Mīmāṃsā providing influential accounts of the authority and interpretation of normative texts (Davis, 2010).

Within this hermeneutical system, Mīmāṃsā identifies six important means through which the relation and application of textual elements may be determined: *úruti*, *Linga*, *vākya*, *prakaraGa*, *sthāna*, and *samākhyā*.² Classical accounts describe these respectively in terms of direct textual statement, indicative mark, syntactic connection, contextual relation, textual position or sequence, and designation or name. Their importance, however, does not lie simply in their existence as six separate interpretive devices. The distinctive feature is that they are treated as possessing different degrees of evidentiary strength.

Sruti, or direct textual indication, represents the strongest form of textual evidence. It concerns a relation that is directly expressed by the authoritative text rather than requiring the interpreter to establish it through a further inferential or contextual relation. In this respect, *œruti* bears an important affinity with the textualist insistence that interpretation must remain anchored in the authoritative text. However, the *Mîmâmsâ* position is not reducible to textualism. The importance of *sruti* lies in its position within a broader hierarchy: direct textual indication possesses greater force, but interpretation does not become exhausted by direct statement whenever the text leaves a relation to be determined through other indicators (Jaimini, *MîmâmsâSûtra*; Sabara, *Úâbarabhâcya*; Jha, 1933). Classical discussions explicitly distinguish *œruti* from other means of establishing *vinîyoga* precisely because it can directly establish the relevant relation.

Linga, or an indicative mark, represents a less direct form of interpretive evidence. Its importance lies in the fact that a textual element may indicate normative or relational significance without explicitly stating the entire relation, as in the case of *ûruti*. Linga should not, however, be equated with the modern concept of legislative purpose. Such an equation would collapse an important conceptual distinction between classical *Mîmâmsâ* and modern purposivism. Rather, Linga demonstrates the broader *Mîmâmsâ* insight that interpretive meaning can be supported by identifiable indications whose force is weaker than that of a direct statement but capable of determining interpretation in appropriate circumstances (Jha, 1933; Taber, 2005). Its contemporary jurisprudential relevance therefore lies in demonstrating how interpretation may move beyond isolated semantic content without becoming detached from textual evidence.

Vâkya, or syntactic connection, draws attention to the relation among words and expressions within a connected linguistic unit. Its significance follows from the *Mîmâmsâ* recognition that a textual element cannot always be interpreted independently of the linguistic structure in which it occurs. The meaning and normative function of a statement may depend upon its relation to other elements of the sentence or connected textual expression (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990). In legal interpretation, this provides a useful conceptual analogue to the principle that statutory language must be read in accordance with grammar, syntax, and linguistic coherence rather than by isolating individual words. Vâkya therefore contributes to a conception of interpretation in which linguistic relations constrain the range of permissible meanings.

PrakaraGa, or contextual relation, concerns the connection of a textual element with the broader subject matter or context within which it occurs. This has obvious relevance for contemporary legal interpretation because statutory meaning is frequently determined through reference to the surrounding provisions and the subject matter of the enactment. *Mîmâmsâ*'s significance here is not that it invented contextual interpretation, but that it places contextual evidence within a structured hierarchy of interpretive indicators (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990; Taber, 2005). Context is therefore neither irrelevant nor automatically decisive. Its interpretive force depends upon its relationship to other available indicators. This provides a conceptual basis for what may be called constrained contextualism: context is admitted as an interpretive consideration without becoming an unrestricted licence for the interpreter to introduce whatever external consideration appears normatively attractive.

Sthâna, concerning position or sequence, directs attention to the location of a textual element within a larger normative arrangement. The significance of textual position is particularly relevant to systematic legal interpretation, where the meaning of a provision may be influenced by its location within a chapter, section, statutory scheme, or broader legal structure. *Mîmâmsâ* does not, of course, equate *sthâna* with modern structural

interpretation. Rather, it recognises that the position occupied by a textual element can contribute to determining its normative relation (Jha, 1933; Taber, 2005). This allows the interpreter to move from an atomistic understanding of textual meaning toward an understanding of the normative text as an internally organised structure.

Samâkhyâ, or designation, represents a comparatively indirect indicator. The name or designation attached to a textual element can contribute to identifying its function or relation, although its evidentiary force is weaker than that of direct textual indication. Its possible contemporary analogue may be found in the interpretive relevance sometimes attributed to statutory titles, headings, classifications, or designations. The comparison must, however, remain cautious: samâkhyâ should not be translated into the modern doctrine of statutory headings. Its importance for the present argument lies in demonstrating that Mîmâmsâ recognised even relatively indirect forms of textual evidence while assigning them a comparatively limited interpretive force (Jha, 1933; Taber, 2005). Classical accounts explicitly place samâkhyâ at the weaker end of the hierarchy of these six indicators.

The six factors therefore should not be understood as six sequential stages through which every interpretation must mechanically proceed. They are better understood as graded sources of interpretive evidence whose relative strength becomes relevant when competing indications arise. Classical Mîmâmsâ discussions place *ûruti* at the strongest end and samâkhyâ at the weakest, while the intermediate indicators occupy positions between them. The importance of this ordering is that interpretive disagreement is not resolved merely by collecting more considerations. It requires determining the relative authority of the considerations involved.

This is where Mîmâmsâ makes a distinctive contribution to the contemporary problem of interpretive pluralism. Western jurisprudence has developed a wide variety of interpretive canons and principles, and it would be incorrect to suggest that it lacks rules of priority altogether. Textualism, purposivism, structural interpretation, and other approaches each establish different grounds for giving particular forms of evidence greater or lesser authority (Dworkin, 1986; Marmor, 2014; Scalia & Garner, 2012). Moreover, doctrines such as harmonious construction, *lexspecialis*, *lex posterior*, and constitutional supremacy already establish particular forms of priority among legal norms. The difficulty, therefore, is not the complete absence of hierarchy. Rather, the problem is that questions of interpretive priority are often distributed among competing jurisprudential theories and separate interpretive doctrines, rather than reconstructed into a single integrated account of the comparative force of interpretive reasons.

Mîmâmsâ offers a distinctive perspective precisely because the relative strength of interpretive indicators is itself made a central component of the hermeneutical system. It therefore shifts the jurisprudential inquiry from a competition between isolated interpretive methods toward a question of meta-hermeneutical ordering. Instead of asking merely whether text, context, structure, or implication is relevant, the interpreter must ask what kind of evidence each represents, what degree of authority it possesses, and under what circumstances it may prevail over another indicator. This is a more specific and defensible claim than merely asserting that Mîmâmsâ contains interpretive tools that modern jurisprudence lacks.

The implications of this framework become particularly visible in the contemporary debate between textualism and purposivism. Textualism seeks to constrain interpretation through fidelity to enacted language, whereas purposivism emphasises the objectives or purposes embodied in legislation (Scalia & Garner, 2012; Barak, 2005). Mîmâmsâ does not

simply choose one side of this opposition. Instead, it suggests that textual authority and contextual or indicative reasoning may occupy different positions within a structured hierarchy.

This provides a potentially significant jurisprudential insight. The usual opposition between textualism and purposivism assumes that fidelity to text and sensitivity to purpose may pull in opposite directions. *Mīmāṃsā* suggests instead that the more fundamental issue is how different kinds of interpretive evidence should be related to authoritative textual meaning. A purposive consideration should not simply override text because a judge regards the purpose as normatively desirable; conversely, textual meaning should not necessarily be treated as self-sufficient when the text's normative relation depends upon syntax, context, or other internal indicators. The question becomes one of justified interpretive priority.

The same feature has implications for the longstanding problem of judicial discretion. Hart's account of the open texture of law and Dworkin's theory of constructive interpretation represent different responses to the difficulty of determining legal outcomes in hard cases (Hart, 2012; Dworkin, 1986). *Mīmāṃsā* does not eliminate the need for interpretive judgment, nor does its hierarchy guarantee a mechanically determinate result in every case. Its contribution lies instead in the possibility of constraining interpretive judgment through publicly articulable rules of evidentiary priority.

The distinction is important. A rule-governed hermeneutic does not imply the disappearance of disagreement. Rather, it changes the nature of the disagreement. The interpreter must justify why a particular indicator is applicable, why it possesses the relevant degree of authority, and why a competing indicator should not displace it. Interpretive legitimacy, therefore, rests not upon the elimination of judicial judgment but upon the transparency and rational defensibility of the reasons by which judgment is exercised. In this respect, *Mīmāṃsā* can be reconstructed as offering a model of constrained interpretive discretion rather than an impossible ideal of completely mechanical interpretation (Freschi & Pascucci, 2021).

The preceding analysis suggests that the most significant contribution of *Mīmāṃsā* is best understood as a model of ordered interpretive pluralism. Contemporary jurisprudence is pluralistic because it recognises that legal meaning may depend upon several types of considerations. *Mīmāṃsā* is relevant because it demonstrates that interpretive plurality need not imply that every interpretive consideration possesses equal authority or that their relative importance can be determined solely by the interpreter's discretionary preferences.

The six indicators provide a conceptual vocabulary for distinguishing different forms of interpretive evidence and for understanding their relative force. *Sruti* establishes the strongest form of direct textual indication; *Linga* introduces indicative evidence; *vākya* emphasises syntactic connection; *prakarana* establishes contextual relation; *sthāna* directs attention to textual position; and *samākhyā* represents a more indirect form of designation. Their philosophical importance therefore lies in their relational architecture, not merely in their individual functions (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990; Taber, 2005).

This also clarifies the precise sense in which *Mīmāṃsā* can contribute to contemporary jurisprudence. It does not provide a set of ancient substitutes for modern legal canons. Nor does it demonstrate that Western jurisprudence has failed to recognise text, context, syntax, structure, or purpose. Rather, it provides a different way of conceptualising the relationship among such considerations: interpretive reasons may be

plural without being epistemically equal. Once this distinction is recognised, the central problem of legal hermeneutics becomes the establishment of a justified priority among competing interpretive reasons.

This reconstruction should not be interpreted as establishing the superiority of Mīmāṃsā over contemporary Western jurisprudence. Such a claim would be historically and philosophically unwarranted. Modern jurisprudence has developed sophisticated mechanisms for resolving conflicts among interpretive considerations, and contemporary theories such as textualism, purposivism, legal pragmatism, and interpretive pluralism offer substantial resources for addressing interpretive disagreement (Marmor, 2014; Scalia & Garner, 2012). The contribution claimed here is narrower and more defensible.

Mīmāṃsā provides a comparative philosophical resource for theorising interpretive priority. Its distinctive value lies in making the relative evidentiary force of interpretive indicators an explicit component of hermeneutical reasoning. This does not mean that the classical hierarchy can be transplanted into modern constitutional or statutory law. The normative authority of Vedic texts, the institutional structure of Dharmaśāstra, and the authority of modern legislation are fundamentally different. The task is therefore one of conceptual reconstruction rather than direct application.

The historical relationship between Mīmāṃsā and Hindu jurisprudence nevertheless makes this reconstruction especially significant. Scholarship on Hindu law has shown that Mīmāṃsā and Dharmaśāstra were historically intertwined and that Mīmāṃsā supplied important hermeneutical and justificatory resources for normative texts (Davis, 2010). Earlier scholarship also explicitly examined the application of Mīmāṃsā rules to Hindu law, demonstrating that the interpretive principles were not confined to abstract Vedic exegesis but entered legal reasoning within the classical and colonial intellectual history of Hindu law (Sarkar, 1909).

The contemporary relevance of Mīmāṃsā therefore lies neither in its supposed discovery of interpretive factors unknown to Western jurisprudence nor in its direct transplantation into modern legal systems. Its significance lies in the methodological question it foregrounds: when several legitimate interpretive reasons compete, what establishes their relative authority? By treating interpretive indicators as differentiated in evidentiary force and by developing rules for their interaction, Mīmāṃsā provides a distinctive conceptual model for thinking about this problem.

Mīmāṃsā consequently contributes to legal hermeneutics at a meta-hermeneutical level. Its six interpretive indicators should not be regarded simply as ancient equivalents of modern legal canons. Their deeper significance lies in the way they transform interpretive plurality into an ordered field of reasons. Textual, linguistic, contextual, structural, and indicative considerations can all participate in the determination of meaning, but their interpretive force is not presumed to be identical. The interpreter must therefore attend not only to *what* counts as evidence but also to *why* one form of evidence should prevail over another.

This is the point at which Mīmāṃsā can make a distinctive contribution to contemporary legal philosophy. Western jurisprudence possesses an extensive repertoire of interpretive factors and conflict-resolution doctrines, but the relation among those factors remains a central object of jurisprudential disagreement. Mīmāṃsā offers a different conceptual orientation: rather than treating interpretation primarily as a choice between competing methodologies, it can be reconstructed as a structured inquiry into the relative authority of competing interpretive reasons. Its contribution is therefore not another method

alongside textualism, purposivism, intentionalism, or hermeneutics, but a theoretical resource for asking a prior question—how should interpretive methods and reasons themselves be ordered? In this sense, *Mīmāṃsā* offers contemporary legal hermeneutics a model of ordered interpretive pluralism: a framework capable of recognising multiple sources of meaning while simultaneously subjecting their interaction to rules of comparative authority and justification.

Reconstructing legal hermeneutics: what can legal theory learn from *Mīmāṃsā*?

The preceding section argued that the significance of *Mīmāṃsā* does not lie in possessing interpretive considerations absent from Western jurisprudence. Contemporary legal theory likewise recognises text, syntax, context, structure, purpose, and history as relevant sources of legal meaning (Barak, 2005; Marmor, 2014; Scalia & Garner, 2012). The distinctive contribution of *Mīmāṃsā* lies instead in its explicit concern with the relative force of interpretive indicators. The six indicators—*śruti*, *linga*, *vākya*, *prakaraGa*, *sthāna*, and *samākhyā*—are not six sequential stages but differentiated forms of interpretive evidence whose relative strength becomes relevant when competing indications arise (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990; Taber, 2005). *Mīmāṃsā* therefore provides a useful conceptual resource for a problem that remains contested in contemporary jurisprudence: how should competing interpretive reasons be prioritised? Legal ambiguity is not simply a problem of identifying possible meanings; it is a problem of determining which reasons for preferring one meaning over another should carry greater authority. Contemporary jurisprudence employs textual, contextual, purposive, structural, and historical approaches, but these approaches differ over their relative weight (Barak, 2005; Manning, 2024; Marmor, 2014). *Mīmāṃsā* offers a different orientation. Its hierarchy gives greater force to direct textual indication (*śruti*) while recognising progressively more indirect forms of indication through *linga*, *vākya*, *prakaraGa*, *sthāna*, and *samākhyā* (Jha, 1933; Taber, 2005). The importance of this framework is therefore not that it eliminates ambiguity, but that it provides a principled basis for ordering competing interpretive evidence.

This distinction is crucial for jurisprudence. Interpretation need not be reduced either to literalism or to unrestricted contextual reasoning. A stronger interpretive indicator may constrain a weaker one, while weaker indicators may become relevant where stronger textual evidence does not settle the question (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990). *Mīmāṃsā* consequently offers a model of constrained interpretive pluralism: several forms of evidence may participate in interpretation, but they are not necessarily equally strong. The same principle is relevant when legal provisions appear to conflict. Modern jurisprudence employs doctrines such as harmonious construction, *lexspecialis*, *lex posterior*, and constitutional supremacy to determine the relationship between competing legal norms (Barak, 2012; Dickson, 2021). *Mīmāṃsā* should not be presented as replacing these doctrines. Its relevance lies at a more general methodological level. Classical *Mīmāṃsā* approaches apparent textual conflict by determining the relation among authoritative statements and by applying rules governing the comparative force of interpretive indicators (Ākṣara, *Ūḍārabhāṇya*; Kumārila Bhaṇṇa, *Tantravārttika*; Freschi & Pascucci, 2021). Reconstructed for legal theory, this suggests that conflict should not be approached merely by selecting one provision over another. The interpreter should first determine what kind of interpretive evidence establishes the relationship between the provisions and why that evidence should receive priority. *Mīmāṃsā* thus contributes a model in which coherence is pursued through structured relations among interpretive reasons rather than through unarticulated judicial preference.

Mīmāṃsā also offers a useful way to frame the textualism–purposivism debate. Textualism emphasises enacted language, whereas purposivism gives greater weight to legislative objectives (Scalia & Garner, 2012; Barak, 2005). Mīmāṃsā does not simply choose between these approaches. Its emphasis on *œruti* gives direct textual indication substantial authority. At the same time, *Linga*, *vākya*, *prakaraGa*, *sthāna*, and *samākhyā* demonstrate that normative significance may also depend upon indicative, syntactic, contextual, structural, and designative relations (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990; Taber, 2005). Importantly, *Linga* should not be equated with modern legislative purpose. The comparison is structural rather than identical: both recognise that meaning may involve more than isolated lexical content, but Mīmāṃsā situates such considerations within an ordered system of interpretive evidence. Its contribution is therefore to reframe the opposition between text and context as a problem of interpretive priority, rather than simply choosing one methodological camp over another. The problem of interpretive priority ultimately concerns judicial discretion. Hart’s account of open texture and Dworkin’s theory of constructive interpretation offer influential but different accounts of hard cases (Hart, 2012; Dworkin, 1986). Mīmāṃsā does not eliminate interpretive judgment. Rather, it offers a model in which judgment is constrained by identifiable interpretive reasons and their relative force (Taber, 2005; Freschi & Pascucci, 2021). This distinction is important: Mīmāṃsā constrains discretion; it does not abolish it. The interpreter must justify why a particular indicator is relevant, why it possesses greater interpretive force, and why a competing consideration should not prevail. Such an approach shifts the focus from eliminating judicial judgment to making its exercise publicly defensible. In this respect, Mīmāṃsā offers a potentially valuable contribution to contemporary concerns with judicial legitimacy and reasoned adjudication (Poscher, 2023).

The jurisprudential contribution of Mīmāṃsā can therefore be formulated as ordered interpretive pluralism. Western jurisprudence already recognises multiple sources of legal meaning; Mīmāṃsā’s distinctive relevance lies in demonstrating how interpretive plurality can coexist with differentiated evidentiary force. Its six indicators should not be transplanted mechanically into modern statutory or constitutional law. Rather, the underlying principle can be reconstructed as follows: multiple interpretive reasons may be legitimate without being equally authoritative (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990; Taber, 2005). The contribution is consequently meta-hermeneutical rather than merely methodological. Mīmāṃsā does not offer a substitute for textualism, purposivism, structuralism, or contemporary hermeneutics. It adds a prior question: how should competing interpretive reasons themselves be ordered and justified? Its value for contemporary legal theory lies precisely in this shift—from competing interpretive methods to the principled ordering of interpretive reasons. The resulting model is neither rigid textualism nor unrestricted judicial discretion. It is a form of interpretive reasoning in which textual authority remains central, contextual and relational evidence remains relevant, and their interaction is subjected to principles of relative interpretive force. Mīmāṃsā therefore offers contemporary legal hermeneutics a distinctive comparative resource for developing a more ordered, constrained, and publicly justifiable pluralism of interpretation.

Comparative evaluation:

Mīmāṃsā in dialogue with contemporary legal hermeneutics

The preceding discussion has argued that Mīmāṃsā is relevant to legal hermeneutics not because it contains interpretive considerations unknown to modern jurisprudence, but

because it develops a systematic account of the relative interpretive force of such considerations. Contemporary legal interpretation already operates through multiple forms of meaning—semantic, contextual, intended, structural, and previously established meaning—and disagreement often concerns how these forms should be selected or prioritised (Fallon, 2017; Marmor, 2014). The *Mīmāṃsā* contribution is therefore more specific: its interpretive architecture makes the problem of priority among interpretive reasons an explicit part of hermeneutical reasoning (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990; Taber, 2005). Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics rejects the assumption that interpretation is simply the recovery of an original or fixed meaning. Understanding is historically situated and shaped through the encounter between interpreter, text, and tradition (Gadamer, 2004; Malpas, 2018). This has clear significance for law, where past authoritative texts must be interpreted in the present. Legal scholarship on Gadamer accordingly emphasises the relevance of historical situatedness, dialogue, and the interpreter's involvement in the process of understanding (Mootz, 2007; Poscher, 2019).

Mīmāṃsā rejects an entirely isolated reading of textual units. Syntax, contextual relation, textual position, and other indicators may contribute to determining the significance of an authoritative statement (Clooney, 1990; Jha, 1933; Taber, 2005). However, the two approaches address different questions. Gadamer primarily asks how understanding is possible, whereas *Mīmāṃsā* asks how competing indications should be assessed within an interpretive order. The distinction is important for jurisprudence because legal adjudication requires not only understanding but also justification for preferring one legally consequential interpretation over another. *Mīmāṃsā*'s significance, consequently, lies not in overcoming Gadamer's hermeneutics but in supplying a more explicit account of interpretive ordering. Dworkin's law-as-integrity approach requires judges to interpret legal practice so that it both fits existing institutional history and presents that practice in its morally best light (Dworkin, 1986). Interpretation is consequently constructive rather than merely descriptive. Dworkin's theory has itself been discussed in relation to hermeneutical traditions, including Gadamer, although the nature of that relationship remains contested (Henley, 1990; Coelho, 2013). *Mīmāṃsā* also rejects the view that authoritative statements are wholly isolated units. The meaning and normative function of a statement may depend upon its relation to other textual elements and upon the relative force of different indicators (Jha, 1933; Freschi & Pascucci, 2021). The difference lies in the basis of justification. Dworkin makes constructive coherence and moral justification central to legal interpretation; *Mīmāṃsā* places greater emphasis on the ordered evidentiary relations through which authoritative meaning is determined. The contrast is therefore not simply morality versus method. Rather, it concerns two different ways of constraining interpretation: Dworkin through constructive justification within legal practice, and *Mīmāṃsā* through differentiated interpretive force.

This distinction matters because coherence alone does not determine which reason should prevail. A legal interpreter may be able to construct more than one coherent reading. *Mīmāṃsā* draws attention to the further question of why one interpretive indication should control another. Its comparative value, therefore, lies in shifting attention from coherence as an interpretive outcome to the ordering of the reasons that establish coherence. Scalia's textualism places enacted language and public meaning at the centre of legal interpretation and seeks to limit judicial reliance on subjective policy preferences or speculative legislative intentions (Scalia & Garner, 2012). *Mīmāṃsā* provides a point of comparison because direct textual indication possesses strong interpretive authority within its own hermeneutical framework (Jha, 1933).

The comparison becomes more significant, however, once interpretation moves beyond direct textual indication. *Mīmāṃsā* recognises *Linga*, *vākya*, *prakaraṇa*, *sthāna*, and *samākhyā* as relevant to the determination of textual relations (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990; Taber, 2005). Text therefore remains authoritative without being treated as semantically self-sufficient in every interpretive situation. This is significant in light of contemporary debates over legal meaning, in which scholars have questioned whether semantic or public meaning can always yield a uniquely determinate answer without contextual and normative judgment (Fallon, 2017). The point should not be overstated. *Mīmāṃsā* is not merely an alternative to modern purposivism, nor should *Linga* be equated with legislative purpose. The comparison is instead methodological. Both approaches recognise that interpretation cannot always stop at isolated lexical meaning, but *Mīmāṃsā* subjects the movement beyond direct textual indication to an ordered framework of interpretive evidence. Its contribution is therefore to place textual authority and interpretive plurality within the same structure.

The comparison does not show that *Mīmāṃsā* is superior to Gadamer, Dworkin, or Scalia. Nor does it establish that contemporary jurisprudence lacks mechanisms for resolving interpretive disagreement. Indeed, legal hermeneutics itself is increasingly understood as involving a plurality of practices, including interpretation, rule-following, construction, and the exercise of discretion (Poscher, 2019). The more limited claim is that *Mīmāṃsā* makes one aspect of this plurality unusually explicit: the relative force of interpretive reasons. Gadamer foregrounds the situated character of understanding; Dworkin foregrounds constructive coherence and justification; Scalia foregrounds textual authority. *Mīmāṃsā* contributes a different analytical emphasis: the possibility of distinguishing among interpretive indicators according to their relative force and using that distinction to structure interpretive reasoning (Jha, 1933; Taber, 2005; Freschi & Pascucci, 2021). Its relevance is therefore not that it offers a fourth competing school of legal interpretation, but that it raises a question before the choice among schools: when several interpretive reasons are legitimate, what justifies giving one priority over another?

This is the basis of what may be termed ordered interpretive pluralism. The model is pluralistic because interpretation can involve several legitimate sources of meaning; it is ordered because those sources are not presumed to possess equal interpretive force. *Mīmāṃsā* thus provides a conceptual framework for thinking about interpretive plurality without collapsing into methodological relativism (Jha, 1933; Clooney, 1990; Davis, 2010). Davis's treatment of *Mīmāṃsā* within the hermeneutics of Hindu law is particularly relevant here because it situates *Mīmāṃsā* within a broader tradition of normative interpretation rather than treating it merely as an abstract theory of scriptural exegesis. The argument, however, remains reconstructive. The *Mīmāṃsā* hierarchy cannot simply be transplanted into modern statutory or constitutional adjudication because the normative authority and institutional settings of the two traditions differ. What can be transferred is not the substantive hierarchy itself but the methodological insight that interpretive reasons may be plural yet differently authoritative. In this limited sense, *Mīmāṃsā* contributes to contemporary legal hermeneutics by making interpretive priority a distinct object of jurisprudential analysis.

The comparative lesson is therefore modest but consequential. The question for legal interpretation is not merely whether text, context, structure, history, or purpose is relevant. It is also how the interpreter should justify the priority assigned to each when they conflict. *Mīmāṃsā* provides a distinctive conceptual resource for this problem. Its

contribution lies not in replacing contemporary interpretive theories, but in supplying a framework within which the ordering of their underlying reasons can itself become a subject of critical jurisprudential inquiry.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the jurisprudential relevance of Mīmāṃsā lies less in the novelty of its individual interpretive categories than in its systematic treatment of their relative interpretive force. Contemporary legal theories already recognise text, context, structure, purpose, and coherence as relevant to interpretation. The more difficult question concerns their priority when they generate competing readings. Mīmāṃsā sharpens this question by organising *śruti*, *linga*, *vākya*, *prakaraṇa*, *sthāna*, and *śamākhyā* according to differentiated interpretive strength. Its significance, therefore, is not that it eliminates interpretive disagreement, but that it provides a model for making the grounds of interpretive priority more explicit.

The comparative analysis also indicates the limits of the Mīmāṃsā contribution. Gadamer, Dworkin, and Scalia address different dimensions of interpretation that cannot be reduced to a Mīmāṃsā framework. Nor can the classical hierarchy be transferred directly to modern constitutional or statutory adjudication. The normative authority of Vedic texts and the institutional conditions of Mīmāṃsā interpretation differ fundamentally from those of contemporary legal systems. The argument is consequently one of critical reconstruction, not historical continuity or doctrinal transplantation. Within these limits, Mīmāṃsā offers a useful comparative insight: interpretive plurality need not entail methodological indeterminacy. Multiple interpretive reasons may be recognised, each subject to a different priority. This article terms that possibility ordered interpretive pluralism. Its broader jurisprudential value lies in shifting attention from the familiar opposition among interpretive methods to a prior question: how should competing interpretive reasons be ranked and justified? Mīmāṃsā does not provide a final answer to that question, but it offers a distinctive framework within which the question can be asked more systematically.

Notes

¹Mīmāṃsā (2nd century BCE) is one of the orthodox schools of classical Indian philosophy founded by the sage Jaimini. The foundational text of this school is the Mīmāṃsāśāstra. As a Vedānugata system, it is closely associated with the ritualistic portion of the Vedas and is therefore also known as Karmakāṇḍa or Pūrvamīmāṃsā. Its primary concern is the interpretation of injunctive texts that prescribe ritual obligations and sacrificial acts to address conflicts, inconsistencies, and ambiguities within scriptural texts. Mīmāṃsā develops a sophisticated hermeneutical methodology based on systematic textual interpretation. Through this interpretive framework, it identifies and distinguishes different levels of meaning, including literal meaning (*Vācya*), figurative meaning (*Lakṣya*), and implied meaning (*Vyāngya*). For further details, see Roy (1992, 1993).

²Mīmāṃsā Sūtra 3.3.14 : *śruti-linga-vākya-prakaraṇa-sthāna-śamākhyānāṁ samavāye pāraḍauryaḥ artha-viprakāśaḥ*.

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