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Ethan Mills, *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, and Śrī Harṣa*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2018. Pp. xxxvi + 217. ISBN: 978-1-4984-5569-2.

At a time in which there are growing calls to expand the story that we tell about philosophy to include other traditions besides the Euro-American one, Ethan Mills's 2018 book *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India* makes two significant contributions for those who are interested in skepticism. First, it offers an accessible gateway to the work of prominent philosophers from classical India who exhibited skeptical inclinations, chiefly Nāgārjuna (c. 150–200 CE), Jayarāsi (c. 770–830 CE), and Śrī Harṣa (c. 1125–1180 CE). While developing an interpretation of their thought, the book places emphasis on clarifying philosophical terminology that is frequently used in Indian discourses, introducing argument forms that are commonly employed in the tradition, and elaborating on some of the textual foundation stones of classical Indian philosophy without presupposing prior knowledge of them. In this, it is especially suitable for readers who are acquainted with Western epistemology, but have little or no background in Indian thought. Second, Mills builds on his interpretation of the three thinkers, whose philosophical approach he characterizes as skepticism regarding the project of philosophical inquiry, in order to draw conclusions about the limits of philosophy in general and also the benefits—in fact, the necessity—of incorporating ideas from other geographical regions into philosophical studies. Accordingly, in the final pages of the book, he concludes on the metaphilosophical level that “deep knowledge is what philosophers are after. And it is that that it seems we can never have. Thus, the proper attitude toward the pursuit of this sort of deep knowledge is skepticism” (175). And on the methodological level he further states that his study of Indian thinkers in their historical context demonstrates that “the category of philosophical skepticism is broader and more diverse than most contemporary philosophers think” (178).

This book consists of seven chapters and can be divided into four parts. In chapter 1, Mills identifies early textual sources that prefigure the skeptical tradition of classical India, a tradition that according to him is characterized by the fact that it directs its skeptical efforts towards philosophy. The book then dedicates two chapters to each of the “three pillars” that embody this traditional line across different schools; namely, Nāgārjuna (chapters 2 and 3), who writes within the doctrinal framework of Buddhism; Jayarāśi (chapters 4 and 5), who follows the materialist Cārvāka worldview; and Śrī Harṣa (chapters 6 and 7), who adheres to the principles of the non-dualist Advaita Vedānta school. The first chapter in each dyad is where Mills develops his skeptical reading of the philosopher; in the subsequent chapter, he analyzes select arguments from the philosopher’s works that support his interpretation.

In order to trace the origins of the Indian inclination to develop skepticism about philosophy, chapter 1 extracts passages from the Vedas and the Upaniṣads—the two earliest strata of Indian philosophy, and more specifically of Orthodox Hindu philosophy—as well as from the Buddhist Pāli Canon, the collection of discourses ascribed to the historical Buddha. In Vedic hymns, such as the well-known *Nāsadīya Sūkta*, Mills unearths expressions of epistemological skepticism “in which philosophical probings turn back on themselves” (6), thereby anticipating the Indian interest in doubting philosophy, while in Upaniṣadic texts, he recognizes a form of “mystical skepticism,” referring to mystical descriptions that point to the limitation of knowledge, including sorts of knowing that are associated with rational and empirical methods of philosophical inquiry. The *suttas* (discourses) from the Pāli Canon examined in chapter 1 reveal Buddhist and non-Buddhist strands with skeptical tinges: the materialist position that was later taken up by Jayarāśi; “eel-wiggler” sophism, whose practitioners refuse to commit to any view and employ *tetralemma* and *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation in order to deny any possible position; and finally “Buddhist quietism”—the inclination of early Buddhism to avoid speculative thinking and conceptual proliferation and to aim at the relinquishing of all views, even Buddhist tenets.

In his reading of Nāgārjuna, Mills develops a skeptical interpretation of the theory of emptiness, which, he argues, resolves some of its internal contradictions. One conspicuous theoretical contradiction, which is discussed in chapter 2, is the inconsistency between Nāgārjuna’s elaborate explication of emptiness—a detailed analysis of the nature of phenomena, which ultimately lack any essence—and his claim that he does not affirm or deny anything; that is, that he does not hold any view of his own. On Mills’s reading, these two conflicting facets express two

consecutive stages in which the theory of emptiness unfolds. In the first stage, Nāgārjuna applies his theory in order to demonstrate that all views are empty of essence and therefore that they cannot be established; in the second, emptiness is directed towards itself and undermines the only remaining view. Mills argues that in this two-stage refutation of all philosophical views, including his own, Nāgārjuna proves to be a skeptic about philosophy. He points out that Nāgārjuna's skeptical procedure can be traced back to early Buddhist practice, where we find two conflicting inclinations: the positive cultivation of liberating knowledge (a correct view of reality) and quietism, which amounts to the eradication of all conceptualization.

Two well-known lines of argument from Nāgārjuna's writings are his refutation of knowledge instruments (*pramāṇas*) in his work *Dispeller of Disputes* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*) and the rejection of all theories of causation in the first chapter of *Root Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*). Chapter 3 analyzes these philosophical moves. Mills points out that in these lines of argument, we find strategies that are characteristic of Nāgārjuna—his use of *tetralemma* in order to exhaustively dismiss all conceptually possible theories on a given philosophical topic (here, causation) and his recourse to *reductio ad absurdum* in order to refute rival theories, such as the realist's theory of knowledge instruments, without (allegedly) implying any positive alternative of his own. In his view, the fact that Nāgārjuna attacks classical India's ubiquitous theory of knowledge and justification and concerns himself with the refutation of metaphysics by targeting the prevalent causal theories of his time suggests that he is not a mere epistemological skeptic about ordinary beliefs. Rather, he displays the higher-level skepticism about philosophy. Nonetheless, current received interpretations of Nāgārjuna do indeed maintain that his arguments aim to advance a determinate position, be it anti-realism or "conventionalist regularism." (Another widespread positive interpretation of the theory of emptiness is metaphysical nihilism, which the chapter does not address despite its high relevance.) Other commentators, meanwhile, take Nāgārjuna to be an epistemological skeptic. Mills attempts to defend his interpretation against the other readings, although he decides not to engage with the latter thesis, which is regrettable, since—at least to my mind—it is epistemological skepticism, the closest interpretation to Mills's own, that in many respects challenges his thesis that skepticism about philosophy is a separate category, independent of skepticism about ordinary beliefs.

Jayarāśi, the second "pillar" of skepticism in India, is the focus of the next two chapters. Unlike Nāgārjuna, whose arguments target different areas of philosophy, Jayarāśi seeks to

specifically show the futility of epistemology, which in the Indian context is subsumed under the shared term of *pramāṇavāda* (“theory of knowledge instruments”). In chapter 4, after arguing in favor of seeing Jayarāśi as a member of the materialist Cārvāka school, despite him not accepting this school’s epistemology or metaphysics, Mills develops a contextualist interpretation of his philosophy that enables him to respond to one of the skeptic’s basic inconsistencies. This inconsistency is that by claiming not to know whether the evidence for his beliefs is adequate, the skeptic admits that he lacks reasons for his skepticism. Jayarāśi’s skepticism, Mills argues, can be usefully understood as being contained within an epistemological framework akin to David Lewis’s and Stewart Cohen’s versions of contextualism (although he admits that Jayarāśi himself would reject contextualism as an epistemological theory [85]). Thus, statements in Jayarāśi’s *Lion Destroying All Principles (Tattvopalavasimha)* such as “when, in this way, the principles are entirely destroyed, all everyday practices are made delightful, because they are not deliberated” (quoted on p. 84) and “regarding worldly everyday practice, a fool and a philosopher (*paṇḍita*) are similar” (quoted on p. 86) suggest that for him, knowledge ascriptions are context-sensitive—they can be false in “skeptical” contexts, yet true in the context of everyday life. From this viewpoint, Jayarāśi might have responded to the self-refutation entailed by the inconsistency objection by saying that epistemic concepts can be legitimately used in everyday contexts while being firmly rejected in the context of epistemology.

Mills refines his portrait of Jayarāśi in chapter 5, where he shows that his arguments were particularly designed to tackle the epistemological realism—that is, realism about the objects of epistemological inquiry—that Mills attributes to the Buddhist philosophers Dignāga (c. 480–540 CE) and Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660 CE). These two epistemologists maintained that only two instruments of knowledge—namely, direct perception and inference—are reliable and that all other knowledge sources—for example, scriptural testimony—can be reduced to them. Direct perception is free from conceptualization and derives the knowledge that it provides from a particular sign of an object, whereas inference relies on universal signs shared by classes of objects. Jayarāśi’s strategy for refuting Dignāga and Dharmakīrti is to demonstrate that their definition of knowledge instruments fails to stand up to philosophical scrutiny, thereby showing that neither the instruments of knowledge nor their objects can be established, which has far-reaching practical implications for everyday life. Two of Jayarāśi’s arguments to this effect are the “non-establishment of difference” and the “impossibility of considering duality” arguments. Through

the former, he seeks to show that it is impossible to establish a clear distinction between the two knowledge instruments; through the latter, that one knowledge instrument cannot apprehend the other and that therefore the exact number of knowledge instruments cannot be conclusively determined.

Chapter 6 turns to Śrī Harṣa. It opens with preliminary remarks on the central ideas, thinkers, and intellectual milestones of two of the principal philosophical systems in classical India: Advaita Vedānta (non-duality), with which Śrī Harṣa is arguably affiliated, and the realist Nyāya (logic) school. In short, Advaita philosophy draws on the Upaniṣads in order to develop the position that existence is a single unity, whereas our ordinary apprehension of reality as consisting of separate entities (including the most basic distinction that we make between ourselves and the world) is an illusion that ought to be overcome through ineffable, mystical experience. Nyāya epistemology, by contrast, is essentially dualist, as it asserts the existence of separate knowledge instruments (or cognition) and their objects (or the physical world). In this regard, Śrī Harṣa criticizes the Nyāya, in what Mills suggests to be yet another expression of skepticism about philosophy—this time, of the mystical sort. Śrī Harṣa’s critique of Nyāya realism about cognition and its objects is meant to “open up the *possibility* of mystical, non-dual experience, but [it] does not directly imply that such experience is veridical. Śrī Harṣa is clearing the ground of realist debris, but he is not thereby erecting an edifice of idealism” (127). This chapter defends this thesis against other contemporary readings of Śrī Harṣa, which variously understand his philosophy as endorsing a positive idealistic position, as non-realist in nature, and as a form of negative dialectic, the aim of which is to show that other doctrines contradict themselves.

Mills corroborates this reading of Śrī Harṣa in chapter 7, where he presents several arguments from the philosopher’s *The Sweets of Refutation* (*Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*) that aim to demonstrate the limits of philosophical inquiry. The first argument concerns the practice of philosophical debate—a standard form of argumentation in classical India for centuries and part and parcel of the philosophical framework perfected by the Nyāya. In this context, it is normally presupposed that all parties in the debate must accept the validity of knowledge instruments as a necessary condition for such encounters to be productive and meaningful. Śrī Harṣa’s argument sets out to prove that this is not so. Resting on a set of *reductiones ad absurdum*, it suggests that such acceptance is not necessary for the participants to engage in the debate (for them to prove or disprove a philosophical position), nor as a cause for initiating the activity of debate, nor because

the existence of knowledge instruments is commonly accepted by ordinary people, nor to prevent unwanted logical consequences. That is, a skeptical philosopher can engage in a destructive debate without thereby admitting the existence or reliability of any knowledge instrument. Three other arguments target the ontological notion of existence (*sattā*). They aim to show that (1) although the objects of our cognition seem to have independent existence, inferring existence from cognition is invalid; that (2) existence as a property is a redundant qualification, as it qualifies all objects that exist—in other words, this notion does not add anything new to what is already known about the objects of cognition; and that (3) the meaning of existence is impossible to explain, as no referent for the term can be found.

Overall, the monograph is quite convincing in how it shows that the three thinkers attempted to refute concepts, views, and even methods of inquiry that belong in philosophical thought and that their arguments were intended to have a skeptical effect. My reservation about the book's thesis is related to the conclusion that Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrī Harṣa display a distinct form of skepticism. A large portion of what Mills classifies as skepticism about philosophy may well be a version, or sub-class, of epistemological skepticism. Take, for example, the claim that Nāgārjuna's and Jayarāśi's attacks on the validity of knowledge instruments render them skeptical of philosophy. Since arguments that challenge the justification of our beliefs or the epistemic processes leading to them respond to some form of epistemological theory (even one as elementary as evidentialism), it may be suggested that the three pillars' arguments against Indian theories of knowledge instruments (*pramāṇavādas*) are simply the Indian counterpart—operating within this particular context, with its distinct presuppositions and developments—of epistemological skepticism in Western philosophy. In this regard, there is no real difference in motivation or scope between Nāgārjuna's attempt to refute the foundational status and absolute validity of the *pramāṇas* and the regress argument in Western epistemology, which raises concerns about our ability to justify our beliefs without running into logical difficulties. It may similarly be suggested that many of the philosophical concepts and views that are refuted by Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi, which are instances of what Mills calls “deep knowledge” (174–175), are merely more sophisticated and abstract beliefs than mundane ones, which he describes as “shallow knowledge” and sees as the target of epistemological skepticism. That is, the difference may not lie in the form of skepticism, but in the degree of analytical investment.

*Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India* is recommended for philosophers, students of philosophy, and general audiences alike who wish to make first strides in the direction of a better understanding of the Indian philosophical tradition. Readers versed in the primary literature may wish to find more robust evidence for some of the historical interpretations presented in the book, but they, too, will no doubt benefit from Mills's insights and his contribution to the study of classical Indian epistemology, which is voiced through clear and lucid argumentation and leaves much to consider.

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