



Oren Hanner (ed.)

# Buddhism and Scepticism

Historical, Philosophical,  
and Comparative Perspectives



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## Some Sceptical Doubts about “Buddhist Scepticism”

Mark Siderits

For my own part, I am sceptical that there is much in Indian Buddhist philosophy that may usefully be seen as scepticism. Moreover, I think that on those occasions where they do employ strategies borrowed from the sceptical toolkit, Buddhist philosophers run into difficulties. I shall be examining possible roles for scepticism in Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, and my conclusions will be mostly negative. But I know that some will disagree. I see my role here to be one of laying out some broad themes in the topic; I shall be provocative in some of my remarks, but I shall do this mostly as an attempt to stimulate discussion.

Ordinarily, “I am sceptical about x” can mean any number of things depending on context. In a society where belief in ghosts is common, “I am sceptical about ghosts” can be used to assert that ghosts do not exist. The sceptic about anthropogenic global warming typically believes that we simply do not know whether global warming is caused by human activity. Philosophical uses of scepticism display the same ambiguity between the ontological and the epistemological. The professed moral sceptic may be a polite moral anti-realist. But strictly speaking, the philosophical sceptic should confine their claim to the epistemic realm and leave ontological questions to metaphysicians. Those are the rules I shall abide by here: by “sceptic,” I shall mean someone who withholds judgement about matters in a certain domain. But there is a further distinction to be drawn. A sceptic might hold that we cannot have knowledge of matters in that domain, or they might instead withhold judgement as to whether or not we can have knowledge of matters in that domain. In Hellenistic thought, the first kind of sceptic was called an Academic, while the second was called a Pyrrhonian. The form of scepticism that has loomed large in modern philosophy from Descartes on, a form often called “radical scepticism,” is of the first kind. I shall be using the term “rad-

ical scepticism” for the first sort of scepticism and “Pyrrhonian” for the second, even though the latter may in fact be more thoroughly disruptive than the former.

There are a number of claims about which Buddhists may be described as being sceptical, such as the claim that there is an *Īśvara*. They are not, though, sceptical about the existence of a self: they say that we can know that there is no such thing. But neither is any Indian Buddhist sceptical about another matter that many would say is beyond the capacities of human knowledge: that there is karma and rebirth. This should, I think, give us pause when considering whether any Buddhists endorse the sort of scepticism practised by Pyrrhonians. Surely Sextus Empiricus would see belief in the karma–rebirth ideology as an obstacle to tranquillity. I shall return to this question later.

For now, I want to say some things about radical scepticism and the uses to which it may be put. The radical sceptic typically denies that we have knowledge about matters in a strictly limited domain, a situation which is then contrasted with what holds elsewhere in the epistemic landscape. Thus, one might be a radical sceptic with respect to the existence of an external world, or of other minds; one might deny that one can ever have knowledge with respect to future states of affairs, or to normative claims; and so on. The radical sceptic generally arrives at this result by employing evidence about matters that we supposedly do know, so that the result is not epistemic annihilation. Thus, Descartes says that his method of doubt would, if unchecked by the *cogito*, still leave in place at least one item of knowledge: that nothing is known. (This is why a Pyrrhonian calls the radical sceptic a “dogmatist.”) But once the radical sceptic’s work is done (say, with respect to our knowledge of the external world), the metaphysician may enter. And it is common to suppose that once we have been shown that there is reason to doubt whether we are in epistemically significant contact with the physical objects that we ordinarily believe populate our world, it is but a short step to subjective idealism. But how exactly is that step taken? It would seem that if I do not know that there is an external world, I equally do not know that there is not. Let us look briefly at how Berkeley, that stock Western idealist, manages the transition from “for all I know there is no external world” to “there is no external world.”

The crucial link is to be found in the epistemological internalism that motivates Descartes’ method of doubt: the thesis that in order to know that *p*, one must know that one knows that *p* (the KK thesis). This thesis is called “internalist” because it makes knowledge conditional on justification being internal to the cognizing subject in some sense. If we accept the analysis of

knowledge as justified true belief, then the KK thesis claims that in order for one to be justified in believing that  $p$ , one must have direct access to the conditions that constitute one’s being justified in believing that  $p$ . And a representationalist account of perception—the view that what one is directly aware of in sense perception is not a physical object but a mental representation—makes it the case that all one’s directly accessible evidence for the existence of an external world consists of states of the subject. This does not itself rule out the possibility that these states result from interaction with an external world. Radical scepticism can, once again, only bring us to the result that for all we know, there may be no external world. But epistemological internalism has another consequence that has been crucial to the argument for idealism. This is the semantic internalist claim that since we must know what we mean by the words we use in articulating knowledge claims, and knowing the meaning of a word involves knowing what entity it refers to, the meaningfulness of any claim about external objects must depend on our having direct access to things external to the mind. Since this is ruled out by a representationalist account of perception, it follows that all talk of an external world is devoid of meaning. Realism about the external world turns out not to be false but, rather, meaningless.

This was Berkeley’s master argument for subjective idealism. It proceeds in two stages. First, radical scepticism yields the disjunction: the intentional object of sensory experience is either an external object or an inner mental state, and we cannot say which. Semantic internalism is then deployed in order to show that the first disjunct is meaningless.<sup>1</sup> But now, when we consider Vasubandhu’s argument for *viññaptimātra*, we see something quite different. Like Berkeley (and Dignāga), he first uses representationalism to set up the disjunction. But his rejection of the external-world realist disjunct does not rely on semantic internalism. Instead, he gives two straightforwardly metaphysical arguments: one aimed at problems that arise in trying to explain how the atoms that are the ultimate reals of the external-world realist ontology could bring about sense perceptions; the other appealing to the principle of lightness (parsimony) to show that the karmic seeds hypothesis yields a better explanation of the genesis of sense perceptions.<sup>2</sup> Yogācārins are not semantic internalists.

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<sup>1</sup> See Berkeley (1713/1998, 1.179ff).

<sup>2</sup> Kellner and Taber (2014) claim that in *Viññāṅikā*, Vasubandhu supports idealism with an argument from ignorance: since external objects cannot be established by any epistemic instrument, they do not exist. While Kellner and Taber seem to distance themselves from an internalist reading, their analysis of Vasubandhu’s strategy comes uncomfortably close. However, my

The alternative to semantic internalism is, naturally enough, semantic externalism. This is the view that meanings “ain’t in the head”; that the meaning of a term is established through causal connections with states of affairs that are distinct from the inner states of individual language-users. The key result of this anti-individualist stance is that a speaker may meaningfully use a term without themselves knowing the referent. In the case of terms used to express sense experience, the referent will be whatever regularly causes the sensory states that speakers are trained to use as criteria of application. Hilary Putnam (1975) used Twin Earth thought experiments to motivate this view of meaning. He later, in the first chapter of his 1981 *Reason, Truth and History*, deployed it in his famous (or, in some quarters, infamous) BIV argument that is meant to serve as a *reductio* on radical sceptical hypotheses.

“BIV” stands for “brains in a vat,” which is what we are invited to suppose we might all be. This is another way, in addition to the “I might be dreaming” scenario, of fleshing out the sceptical hypothesis that the world that is presented to us through our sense perception is radically different from how we take it to be. Imagine, then, that we might be bodiless brains in a vat of nutrients, being fed sensory input through brain implants connected to a super-computer. The programming run by this computer is so sophisticatedly interactive as to be undetectable. Since it is undetectable, when we have the experience as of seeing and touching a pot, the cause of this experience might be a feature of the program (if we are BIVs), or it might be a pot (if we are human beings walking around in the open air). The BIV sceptic will claim that we cannot know which it is. But now the semantic externalist intervenes. Either we are flesh-and-blood humans, or else we are BIVs. Consider the sentence “there is a pot.” The meaning of the word “pot” is whatever reliably causes the sensory stimulation that we have learned to express using “pot” utterances. It follows that the meaning will differ depending on whether we are flesh-and-blood humans or BIVs. If the former, then the reference will be pots; if the latter, then it will be some feature of the computer’s programming. The same will hold for all other terms used to express the content of our sensory experience. Because of this systematic difference in reference

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chief difficulty with their reading is that it strikes me as uncharitably weak. Why, after all, can the realist not retort that perception establishes the existence of external objects? I take Vasubandhu to be arguing in *Vimśikā* that the karmic seeds hypothesis that *vijñaptimātra* theorists use to explain sensory experience posits fewer unobservable entities than does the hypothesis that sensory experience is caused by interaction with external objects (entities that the representationalist agrees are not directly observable). And the theory that posits the least number of unobservable entities in explaining the phenomena wins.

across most terms in our language, we are actually looking at two distinct languages. Let us call the first language “English” and the second “Vat-English.” Given the sceptical hypothesis that for all we know, we might be BIVs, we cannot know which language we are speaking. But if we are speaking English, and we are therefore not BIVs, the sentence “I am a BIV” will be false. And likewise, if we are BIVs and are speaking Vat-English, then the sentence “I am a BIV” will express something false, for the feature of the program that figures in speaker self-reference is not the feature that would normally be expressed in Vat-English by “brain in a vat.” The upshot is that if the sceptical hypothesis were true, it would be false: whichever language we happened to be speaking, it would be false to say “I am a brain in a vat.” The sceptical hypothesis is shown by semantic externalism to be self-refuting.

Now change the sceptical hypothesis to the claim that for all I know, I might be a causal series of *ālaya* consciousnesses. In that case, the word *ghaṭa* would refer to the development of a certain sort of *vāsanā*. Given the shift in reference for this and most other terms, we must then distinguish between Sanskrit and *Ālaya*-Sanskrit. And once again, the result will be that the sceptical hypothesis is self-refuting. While Yogācāra does not employ anything like Berkeley’s scepticism-fuelled argument, Vasubandhu’s buoyancy argument does rely on the hypothesis that we cannot tell from the content of our sensory experience alone whether it originates from interaction with an external world or from the ripening of karmic seeds. As such, it is vulnerable to the charge that it relies on a questionable account of meaning. (The other argument is, as Graham Priest has said, valid by the terms of fifth-century mathematics, but not by those of 21st-century mathematics.)

One might wonder whether a Buddhist would wish to embrace semantic externalism. But the thought that meanings are established through convention, something that is widely shared among Buddhist schools, suggests an implicit endorsement of the externalist’s anti-individualist stance. Conventions are forged by groups of people in interaction with their environment. It is not up to the individual to change the convention by fiat. As Putnam said, meanings ain’t in the head: they exist in the interactions between groups of people and conditions in the world.

Reflection on this result will take us in the direction of Madhyamaka, which is where I think we should go if we want to examine the case for reading Pyrrhonian scepticism into any part of the Buddhist tradition. The externalist refutation of radical sceptical hypotheses suggests that using the sceptic’s disjunction—that for all we know, things might be as we ordinarily



think, or they might be completely different way—for revisionary metaphysical purposes is a mistake. That may in turn suggest that metaphysics is generally a hopeless enterprise: that trying to work out how things are *anyway* is a fool's errand. This conclusion is certainly one way of understanding what Madhyamaka is up to. But before we get to Madhyamaka, we need to go back in time to early Buddhism and look at the treatment of the *avyākṛta* or indeterminate questions in the *Nikāyas*, for this treatment is sometimes cited as evidence of sceptical tendencies in the very inception of the Buddhist tradition (and thus as evidence supporting a sceptical reading of Madhyamaka).

The *avyākṛta* are questions that the Buddha refused to answer. Since sages were expected to have knowledge about all soteric matters, and the questions that the Buddha chose not to answer were on topics deemed to be related to liberation, this refusal was considered noteworthy. One interpretation of his silence is that since answering these questions is not in fact relevant to attaining liberation, not answering them is consistent with the limited omniscience (viz. what might be called Dharmic omniscience) expected of a sage. And while this interpretation is compatible with the possibility of the Buddha simply not knowing the answers to these questions, some take it further and see a certain sort of principled scepticism in his stance. The idea here is that such questions are to be rejected on the grounds that answering them would require engaging in the epistemologically dubious enterprise of “speculative metaphysics.” The Buddha is here seen as a proto-positivist, someone who rejects all attempts to extend knowledge beyond what is subject to empirical confirmation.

While it is clear that the Buddha does reject some of the *avyākṛta* on straightforwardly pragmatic grounds,<sup>3</sup> I am not sure that the Buddha's silence is best seen as stemming from scepticism regarding their domain. There is, I think, an account of his rejection of all alternative answers to the questions that better accords with later treatments of the issue. Take the questions about the post-mortem status of the enlightened person.<sup>4</sup> The Buddha's response is an early instance of a negative *catuṣkoṭi*: it is not to be said that after death the enlightened person exists, does not exist, both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor is non-existent (i.e., attains some inexpressible state). One wonders how all four options can be rejected, but later exegetes uniformly explain this as having been made possible by the use of the com-

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *M* 63 (*Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta*).

<sup>4</sup> *M* 72 (*Aggīvacchagotta Sutta*).

mitmentless *prasajya pratiṣedha* negation. That in turn tells us that the question involves a false presupposition: in this case, the assumption that there is such a thing as a person. Given that persons are mereological sums, and thus are no more than conceptual constructions, it is strictly speaking false that there are persons, and so it is false that there are liberated persons. Statements with false presuppositions lack truth-conditions, and so lack meaning. Their shared presupposition being false, all four possible answers to the question turn out to be meaningless. The Buddha’s rejection of all four is tantamount to the injunction “Don’t say *gobbledygook*.”

This is the first use of what I call a presupposition failure filter, which filters those seemingly meaningful utterances that actually lack semantic significance due to presupposition failure out of the discourse. It is put to great use in Abhidharma articulations of what I call Buddhist Reductionism. There, it serves as a kind of semantic insulation between the two truths, preventing contradictions from arising in the domain of the ultimate truth by confining statements using what are called mere convenient designators to the realm of conventional truth. The mesh of this filter grows ever finer as we move from the earliest Abhidharma texts to the much later work of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (where all discourse is screened out). But it is in Madhyamaka that the presupposition failure filter does its most radical work. It was agreed by all that the test of an entity’s being ultimately real is whether it bears its nature intrinsically—whether it may bear that nature in the unaccompanied state. Mādhyamikas develop a battery of arguments meant to reduce to absurdity various views about what sorts of things might have intrinsic natures and how they might function. If these arguments were to succeed, they would show that there are no ultimately real entities or ultimate truths. And this is so not because the ultimate nature of reality is inexpressible (the Yogācāra view), but rather because the very idea of the ultimate nature of reality is incoherent. Madhyamaka is a particular sort of non-dualism, namely, semantic non-dualism: there are not two kinds of truth, there is just one, the conventional.

Madhyamaka is often taken for a kind of scepticism, specifically Pyrrhonian scepticism (or perhaps that of Jayarāśi’s Lokāyata).<sup>5</sup> It is not hard to see why. Mādhyamikas seek to banish the search for the ultimate truth by showing that there is nothing that such statements could be about. Pyrrhonians

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<sup>5</sup> See Dreyfus and Garfield (2011) for a relatively cautious and nuanced formulation of the claim that Madhyamaka is like Pyrrhonism, but also for references to some less cautious versions.

likewise try to bring about an end to inquiry into matters that are not immediately evident from our experience. Mādhyamikas are routinely accused of moral nihilism, as are Pyrrhonians. Madhyamaka is confronted with the charge of being self-refuting: in purporting to show that there can be no reliable means of belief formation, it is said to render itself unable to support its own claim that all things are empty or devoid of intrinsic natures. Pyrrhonism likewise faces a self-refutation objection. Nāgārjuna claims that he has no thesis, and so does Sextus. Both systems struggle to devise a method that will allow them to achieve their aim of quieting certain sorts of conceptual activity without committing to substantive claims about the nature of the world or our knowledge. And so on.

I am not persuaded by all these parallels. But before saying why, I should mention one additional point that I think does carry some weight. One interesting feature of Sextus' work is the wide variety of topics he addresses. He seems to have something to say against every learned view of his day. This prolixity is a function of the task he set himself: to help his reader attain a state of tranquillity by revealing the absence of conclusive reasons in support of the views held by learned inquirers. And this must be accomplished without suggesting that there is some general recipe for demonstrating the lack of decisive reasons, for to do so would be to lapse into dogmatism, to exempt his own methods from the Pyrrhonian stricture against holding beliefs. All he can do is respond to the views of others, setting out countervailing reasons that might serve as effective antidotes to the particular belief in question. But this appears to have been Nāgārjuna's strategy as well. Each of the 27 chapters of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*MMK*) takes up a different topic, and one has the sense that the work could have been indefinitely extended. This is, I think, because there can be no master argument for the conclusion that all things lack an intrinsic nature. A master argument would require there to be some feature common to all ultimate reals whereby they could be shown to lack intrinsic natures, which would defeat the purpose of showing that all things lack an intrinsic nature; namely, to show that there can be no such thing as how the world is *anyway*. Thus, Mādhyamikas must confine themselves to pointing out absurdities that follow from the views of their realist opponents.<sup>6</sup> Since such opponents and their realist views are many, there may

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<sup>6</sup> By "realist," I here mean something much broader than the external-world realism of a physicalist. The target of Madhyamaka critiques is what is nowadays called metaphysical realism, the view that there is such a thing as how the world is *anyway*, that is, independently of how we happen to conceive of it. The subjective idealism of Yogācāra is just as much a realism in this sense as Cārvāka is.

be no end to the task. What the Mādhyamika must count on is that sooner or later, their interlocutor will get the point and desist from propounding new metaphysical theories.

The prolixities of the two systems do, then, provide some support for calling Madhyamaka a kind of scepticism. But I do not think that this is enough to overcome the differences. Take, for instance, their respective aims. For Sextus, the aim is the tranquillity that comes from no longer forming beliefs through reasoned inquiry. One learns, for instance, to avoid forming a belief about questions such as whether tattooing is good or bad. Instead, one conducts one’s life by acting in accordance with how things appear to one prior to inquiry. Jayarāśi describes the state resulting from this suspension of judgement as one in which “all worldly activities are engaged in with the delight of non-analysis (*avicāritaramañīya*)” (Franco, 1987, p. 44). Perhaps this state is one of delight, but Mādhyamikas are Buddhists, and this is not what Buddhist practice aims at. The Buddhist goal is the cessation of existential suffering; it is to be attained by extirpating all forms of an “I”-sense. It is difficult to see how the Pyrrhonian practice of acquiescing in how things appear to the uninquisitive could lead to such extirpation. Most people have the intuition that they are persisting agents and subjects of awareness. This intuition is what Buddhists have in mind when they speak of *moha* or delusion. How could merely acquiescing in delusion lead to liberation?

Kuzminski (2008) has recently argued for the view that Madhyamaka may usefully be thought of as like Pyrrhonism in important ways. Aware that the acceptance of the doctrine of karma and rebirth is just the sort of belief in a “non-evident” matter that Pyrrhonians would condemn as dogmatic, he asserts (pp. 60–61) that Mādhyamikas do not take the doctrine at all seriously. This is difficult to reconcile with the thrust of *MMK* 26, which concerns precisely how karmic causation generates future births. Perhaps Kuzminski might turn to his claim that for Madhyamaka, *nirvāṇa* is not distinct from *saṃsāra* for support (p. 84), since he equates *saṃsāra* with the Pyrrhonian notion of the “evident”—that is, how things appear to ordinary people—and rebirth is not “evident” in this sense. But for Buddhists, *saṃsāra* is first and foremost a matter of beginningless rebirth, hardly something that ordinary people find themselves compelled to accept given their sensory experience. Moreover, the view that Madhyamaka equates *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* is based on a misreading of *MMK* 25.19. All Nāgārjuna actually says there is that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are alike in both being empty; that is, not ultimately real. To say this is not to say that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are not

conventionally distinct; indeed, Buddhist practice would be pointless otherwise. In support of this claim that the goal of Madhyamaka, *nirvāṇa*, is Pyrrhonian tranquillity, he quotes Candrakīrti to the effect that “the absence of anxiety [i.e., tranquillity] is the distinguishing characteristic of morality” (MAV 6.205b). However, the passage he quotes, \*śīlam cādāhalakṣaṇam, actually means that the precepts of the Path are by nature devoid of passion, the point being that since the passions reinforce the “I”-sense, the path to the cessation of suffering involves practices (such as the cultivation of universal compassion) that work to counter the passions. Given Kuzminski’s description of the Pyrrhonian attitude towards the acquisition of knowledge (p. 39), a much better candidate for an Indian parallel to Pyrrhonism would be Jayarāsi’s Lokāyata. This school is, however, the target of sustained Madhyamaka attack (as at MAV 6.99–102).

Here is one final reason to be sceptical about the attempt to assimilate Madhyamaka into the Pyrrhonian brand. One matter about which the Pyrrhonian must be indifferent is the question of whether or not there is anything behind the appearances in which one acquiesces. When it directly appears to the Pyrrhonian sage that they are hungry, they simply eat. They do not engage in inquiry as to whether it is best that one eats, or how one would best go about eating. Their sceptical practice has trained them not to engage in such inquiry by showing that for any question about the matter, there are good reasons supporting each of the different possible answers. However, this still leaves open the possibility that there are determinate answers to such questions—answers that may be beyond the scope of human knowledge, but determinate answers for all that. Metaphysical realism, the view that there is such a thing as how the world is *anyway*, is not ruled out for the Pyrrhonian. It is, however, for the Mādhyamika. This is precisely the point of the doctrine of emptiness. Indeed, it is the point of the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness. As Nāgārjuna makes clear in *MMK* 13.8cd, the mistake of taking emptiness to be a feature of ultimate reality lies in supposing that there could be such a thing as ultimate reality. The Madhyamaka middle path between realism and nihilism lies in letting the presupposition-failure filter screen out all thought of there being a way that things exist independently of our concepts, which reflect interests and cognitive limitations.

I said above that there can be no master argument for the claim that all things are empty. However, some think that the appeal to dependent origination can be used to fashion such an argument. For my own part, I am sceptical that such an argument could succeed. As usually formulated, it depends on mistaking the *bhāva* of *svabhāva* for “existence” instead of “nature.” When

Ābhidharmikas say that only things with *svabhāva* can be ultimately real, what they mean is not that only things that are not dependent on other things for their coming into existence can be ultimately real. (Such entities would be eternal, and most if not all *dharmas* are thought to be momentary.) What they mean is that only things that can be the way they are without reliance on other simultaneously existing things can be ultimately real. The nature of an ultimately real entity must be something that that entity could have in the unaccompanied or “lonely” state. Moreover, to say that an entity originates in dependence on cause and conditions is not to say that its nature is extrinsic or “borrowed” from some other simultaneously existing entity. So I don’t think that such an argument could be made to work. But if I am wrong about this, that would yield an additional reason to deny that Madhyamaka is Pyrrhonian. Sextus would surely see the deployment of such an argument as evidence of “dogmatism.”

In *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV), Nāgārjuna develops a strategy that may be used to argue against the possibility of establishing the number and nature of the *pramāṇas*; that is, against the very possibility of epistemology. The basic idea is that any attempt to show that a particular cognition resulted from the exercise of a *pramāṇa* or epistemic instrument will incur one of three faults: question-begging, infinite regress, or mutual dependence. (The five “modes” or *prayogas* that Sextus uses for the same purpose include these three.) If, for instance, I claimed that my seeing a pot was veridical on the grounds that it results from perception, and in response to the question of how I know perception to be a *pramāṇa* I were to simply assert that it is, I would be guilty of question-begging. Now, at one time, I took the use of this strategy to amount to an argument against the possibility of there being *pramāṇas*. But in that case, Sextus could accuse Nāgārjuna of dogmatism. Sextus is himself careful to deploy his version of the strategy in carefully delimited contexts so as to make it clear that the opponent’s own views are being used against them. So perhaps the more charitable reading of the discussion in VV is that Nāgārjuna is merely replying to an objection and not developing an argument for a substantive thesis. In either case, Nāgārjuna, like Vasubandhu, is making use of a sceptical stance. Are there difficulties in that?

The opponent here is a metaphysical realist who also thinks that the philosophical enterprise begins with the establishment of the *pramāṇas*.<sup>7</sup> Vācas-

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<sup>7</sup> There is some uncertainty as to who Nāgārjuna’s opponent might have been. At one time, I accepted what was then the consensus view that it was a Naiyāyika. But even in 1979, the dates

pati replies, on Nyāya's behalf, that while the regress that results from seeking to validate a cognition by validating the instrument of that cognition can in principle continue indefinitely, in practice it stops after at most two or three iterations. While this may at first seem to completely miss the point of the argument, on reflection, it turns out to carry some weight.

The first thing to notice here is that Nāgārjuna's strategy might illicitly presuppose epistemological internalism. This presupposition would be illicit because those who are in the business of seeking to determine the number and nature of the *pramāṇas* are externalists: for them, a given cognition counts as an instance of *pramā* or knowledge just in case it is the product of a reliable cause. One need not know that it was so produced in order for it to count as *pramā*; it simply has to be the case that its cause possessed the relevant epistemic virtues. Likewise, one need not know all the evidence that would show a given epistemic procedure to be of the right sort in order to know that that procedure is a *pramāṇa*; all that is required is that the cognition whereby one apprehended the procedure as a *pramāṇa* was produced in the right way. One can look into the pedigree of the cognition; one can look into the pedigree of the procedure that produced the cognition; one can even take the further step of checking up on the procedure one uses to make sure the original procedure is indeed reliable. But one need not do any of these things provided that the cognition is in fact veridical and that it was in fact produced by means of a truth-conducive procedure.

To this, it will be objected that cognizers will not employ an epistemic procedure unless they have some reason to believe that it is trustworthy or truth-conducive. A mere lucky guess does not count as knowledge, and mere lucky guesses are the best we could hope for if we did not seek to discover which are the procedures that cause true beliefs. The question then returns: What epistemic procedures are we to employ in seeking to determine the number and nature of the *pramāṇas*? To this, however, a champion of *pramāṇa* epistemology would respond that we should not expect to completely eliminate the role of luck in our epistemic achievements. A theory of the *pramāṇas* is developed over time, through the method of reflective equilibrium. The point of the method is precisely to lessen the role of luck in our

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seemed wrong. Some scholars now think that the opponent is an Ābhidharmika of some sort. Be that as it may, there is considerable discussion of Nāgārjuna's attack on *pramāṇavāda* in the commentaries on *Nyāya Sūtra*, and for good reason, given that his arguments threaten to undermine the Nyāya enterprise. The important point for present purposes is not whom Nāgārjuna had in mind, but whether his critique succeeds in refuting the metaphysical realist's project. What Naiyāyikas say in response to that critique is relevant to this question.

epistemic achievements. As a universal fallibilist, the causal-theoretic epistemologist concedes that we may never know that we have actually arrived at the ideal solution to the challenges we face in our quest for accurate information about the world. However, this is not to say that an ideal solution does not exist. And, more importantly, it is not to say that we are irrational if we continue to seek an ideal solution. What would be irrational would be to heed these sceptical doubts about the epistemological enterprise.

It is at this point that we should come back to the question of what Nāgārjuna is doing in his critique of *pramāṇa* epistemology in *VV*. Is he merely replying to an objection from a metaphysical realist, someone who is a realist about the *pramāṇas*, or does he intend his argument to have wider consequences? We know that later Mādhyamikas found room for a theory of the *pramāṇas* at the conventional level. So, in their eyes at least, one can do epistemology while acknowledging that all things—including *pramāṇas*—are empty. The question is whether the critique in *VV* is meant to extend to everyone who denies that all things are empty. Buddhist Reductionists like Vasubandhu, Buddhaghosa, and Dharmakīrti also tried their hand at developing a theory of the *pramāṇas*, but as Reductionists, they must hold that there are entities with intrinsic natures. Are they tarred with the same brush that Nāgārjuna might use against a realism like Nyāya’s?

Navya-Naiyāyikas were aware of the problem of epistemic luck and tried to develop ways of eliminating all reference to luck in their theory of the *pramāṇas*. The 12th-century Advaitin Śrīharṣa argued that their attempts actually established that “*pramāṇa*” is a cluster concept, that *pramāṇya* is not a *jāti* or natural kind, but instead a mere *upādhi*.<sup>8</sup> If this is correct, does it help support the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness against the metaphysical realism of the Abhidharma enterprise? Here again, I think the answer must be no. One can, I think, acknowledge that “*pramāṇa*” does not pick out a natural kind and still hold that the world we seek to know through the exercise of *pramāṇas* comes pre-sorted into determinate kinds of individual entities. If Śrīharṣa is right, then *pramāṇa* is a human conceptual construction. But for the Buddhist Reductionist, the same is true of *human*. The fact that a theory of *pramāṇas* must take into account the interests and cognitive limitations of humans is perfectly explicable on the basis of the facts about those *dharma*s to which the existence of humans is reducible. Thus, the result is a standoff between the metaphysical realism of Buddhist Reductionism and the global

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<sup>8</sup> See Granoff (2018).



anti-realism of Madhyamaka. The Mādhyamika can support their anti-realism using *pramāṇas* that are merely conventionally real. But they cannot turn around and deny the coherence of the Buddhist Reductionist employment of *pramāṇas* understood to have the same ontological status. Once again, strategies based on sceptical premises take Buddhist philosophers only so far.

I think it is safe to say that most philosophers reject scepticism, in all its varieties. It has, though, become something of a cliché that scepticism plays an important role in the development of philosophy. Sceptical challenges motivate realist philosophers to forge new conceptual tools for defending what the sceptic calls into question. Scepticism also triggers new agendas in ontology, such as reductionisms and eliminativisms in various domains. The chief focus of the papers collected here is the role that scepticism has played in the development of Buddhist philosophy. But perhaps we should think of Buddhist philosophy as something that continues to develop today. If this makes sense, then we should also be considering what sorts of new sceptical challenges it confronts, and how it might respond. This is what living philosophical traditions do.

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