

Skepticism in Classical Indian Philosophy

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1. Introduction

There are some tantalizing suggestions that Pyrrhonian skepticism has its roots in ancient India. Of them, the most important is Diogenes Laertius's report that Pyrrho accompanied Alexander to India, where he was deeply impressed by the character of the "naked sophists" he encountered (DL IX 61). Influenced by these gymnosophists, Pyrrho is said to have adopted the practices of suspending judgment on matters of belief and cultivating an indifferent composure amid the vicissitudes of ordinary life. Such conduct, and the attitudes that it embodied, became inspirations to later skeptical thinkers. It is a fact that practices of the sort attributed to Pyrrho are richly evident in a number of ancient Indian philosophical and ascetic movements. On this basis, attempts have been made to determine the identity of these gymnosophists and, further, to pinpoint the dialectical tropes within Pyrrhonism that may have their basis in Indian thought. But despite these attempts, and in the absence of any new discoveries, these suggestions will likely remain just that. The paucity of the historical data and the problematic nature of the data itself prevent us from reconstructing a solid bridge between ancient India and Greek skepticism that may serve as the basis of robust historical theorizing.¹

Classical India does, however, lay claim to a sophisticated and diverse culture of epistemological reflection, which includes a number of innovative skeptical thinkers deserving study on their own merits. This chapter is meant to provide such a study, or perhaps more accurately, a prolegomena for such. After some initial ground-laying, I will discuss three leading Indian skeptics and situate them historically and conceptually within the network of competing schools that comprise classical Indian philosophy. They are Nāgārjuna (c. 150 CE), the founder of Madhyamaka Buddhism, Jayarāśi (c. 800), associated with the Indian materialist tradition, and Śrīharṣa (c. 1150), a thinker connected to the school of Nondual (Advaita) Vedānta.

2. Skeptical Elements of the Proto-Philosophical Period

The proto-philosophical period in Indian thought spans roughly from 700 BCE to 100 CE. The most ancient body of literature in India is the Vedas (c. 1500 BCE for their earliest portions). Though they contain occasional moments of philosophical, and indeed skeptical, reflection,² the Vedas are centrally concerned with the performance of sacrifice and the ritual culture that surrounds it. The seeds of classical Indian skepticism were laid at a time of departure from the Vedas, during the middle of the first millennium BCE, amid the tumult associated with the śramana movement. This was a broad social development connected to the rise of urban centers and characterized by itinerancy, asceticism, and bold philosophical speculation. It was motivated by a search for the ultimate solutions to life's problems and dissatisfaction

with the religious orthodoxy embodied in the culture of Vedic sacrifice. A number of later traditions, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Upaniṣadic Hinduism,³ developed out of the śramaṇa milieu.

Certain features of this period lent themselves to skeptical attitudes. Many of its thinkers express acute concern with our basic cognitive abilities and their limitations, arguing that whatever the ultimate reality is, it transcends our ordinary conceptual apparatus. This led naturally to deep strains of apophatic theorizing, often coupled with the view that meditative gnosis is the only access available to such higher realities. Two traditions we will consider below, Madhyamaka Buddhism and Nondual Vedānta, incorporate these ideas into a notion of “two truths,” the conventional and the ultimate. They do, however, unpack this concept in very different ways. Tied to such concerns with the limitations of our basic cognitive abilities was a further contention that the objects identified as the real, medium-sized dry goods of common experience tend to fall apart under scrutiny. For many Upaniṣadic thinkers who pave the way for Hinduism, this manifests as a skepticism about the reality of ordinary objects coupled with an affirmation of unqualified being itself (the locus classicus for this is the sixth book of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad). For Buddhists, this manifests in a variety of ways, including a reduction of macro-objects to sensation-instances that are said to be reified and conceptually constructed into the objects of ordinary experience.

3. Classical Indian Epistemology and the Centrality of Pramānas

The classical period of Indian philosophy begins soon after the start of the Common Era and lasts until roughly 1800 CE. On one side, the classical period is bracketed by the proto-philosophical period, and on the other side, by the modern period, which is centrally preoccupied by the confrontation with the West and by the problems of modernity more generally. (Even today, learned pandits carry the classical traditions onward, though it is an increasingly marginalized feature of Indian intellectual culture.) In the classical period, we find the coalescence of specific schools and sub-schools of thought that have their roots in the proto-philosophical period. A number of Buddhist, Jaina, and Hindu schools of thought may be traced to various earlier cultural and religious movements, but they become distinctly philosophical in the classical period as they become explicitly concerned with both system-building and defending their holdings through dialectical engagement with rivals. Classical philosophers typically work within a school, developing their own innovations through commentaries or sub-commentaries on the foundational texts of their particular tradition.

Another characteristic of the classical period, of great importance to this study, is the centrality of pramānas, “knowledge sources.” Epistemology in classical India largely consists in the identification and analysis of irreducible sources of knowledge (e.g., perception, inference, testimony). Competing schools and thinkers articulate different lists of fundamental pramānas as well as analyses of specific pramānas, and extensive debate over knowledge sources is a key feature of Indian philosophy.⁴ These knowledge sources are not only taken to be the cognitive resources by which we as individuals guide our lives. They are also the basis of philosophical argumentation. Illustrating that my belief or the holding of my

school is supported by genuine pramānas places it on firm ground. Indeed, the early history of pramāna theory is intertwined with a robust culture of formal public debate,⁵ and some of the first systematic Indian treatments of epistemology are integrated with manuals on debate theory and dialectics. The very survival of a school typically depended on patronage, and the primary way to win support was public discourse and debate with rivals. A particular style of debate, the “purely destructive” mode (vitandā), was explicitly recognized in works on dialectics and appropriated by philosophical skeptics. One arguing in this mode disavows any personal thesis to defend and sets himself only to destroy other views. This method was controversial and an object of concern for realists, some of whom argued that it involves an inherent self-contradiction of some kind or other.⁶ The skeptics we will study were acutely aware of this charge and defended themselves against it.

In summation, pramāna discourse, as well as an allied culture of formal debate, provide the conceptual landscape for classical Indian epistemological reflection, and skeptical attacks on the possibility of knowledge presuppose this landscape.

4. Nāgārjuna and Madhyamaka Buddhism

The first Indian skeptic we will consider is the founder of Madhyamaka Buddhism, Nāgārjuna (c. 150 CE). To understand Nāgārjuna’s project, we need to take note of some features of Buddhist thought traceable to the historical Buddha himself (Siddhārta Gautama, 5th century BCE). At the time he began his career as a philosophical and religious teacher, the Buddha was

merely one participant in the śramana movement. After years of self-abnegation and meditative practice, he became convinced that he found a solution to the fundamental problem of life, which he expressed within the Four Noble Truths: life is pervaded by suffering, we suffer because of our desires, we may uproot suffering by uprooting desire, and there is a way of life (the Eightfold Path) that allows us to do so. Expressing and developing this simple formula, the Buddha became one of the most influential thinkers in ancient India and, eventually, much of the Asian world.

A few features of the Buddha's approach to philosophy are relevant to this study. In short, it tends to be therapeutic, pragmatic, and anti-metaphysical. Philosophy is not meant to capture the right theory about the world, but rather to remove problematic misconceptions. The Buddha thus treats human beings' natural tendency to schematize the world as an intellectual analogue of desire: an attempt to harness the world, a clinging of sorts, which perpetuates suffering. We may notice the way in which these elements of the Buddha's thought lead him, and later Buddhist skeptics, to dismiss elaborate philosophical systematizing as a massive unwholesome distraction. Moreover, the Buddha is sensitive to the way in which our conceptual and linguistic frameworks dictate our experiences and understandings. This leads to a general anti-realist sensibility. Finally, he problematizes the commonsense notion of the world as populated by enduring, self-standing macro-objects of common experience. These aspects of the Buddha's teachings collectively set the stage for various tendencies in mature philosophical Buddhism, including empiricism, reductionism, idealism, and skepticism. And with the last, we may now consider Nāgārjuna.

Nāgārjuna flourished while the classical period of Indian philosophy was taking shape and various systems of thought, Buddhist and otherwise, were being constructed.⁷ He opposed what is, from the Madhyamaka⁸ perspective, a common practice of philosophers: the enshrinement within philosophical argumentation of our pre-theoretical tendency to project a world of independent, self-standing objects. His philosophical opponents are those who espoused various sorts of realism, including Buddhist scholastics and Hindu realists like the Nyāya (“Logic”) and Vaiśeṣika (“Particularism”) schools. The central theme of Nāgārjuna’s most important work, The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way (MMK), is emptiness (śūnyatā), the lack of intrinsic existence (svabhāva, “self-nature”), which, he argues, holds for all phenomena. The term svabhāva takes on various related meanings within Madhyamaka thought. Fundamentally, it refers to something whose existence is independent of other conditions or factors.⁹ Emptiness, the denial of intrinsic existence, is taken by Nāgārjuna to be equivalent to dependent co-origination (pratītyasamutpāda), the inexorable interdependence of all phenomena.¹⁰ In short, Nāgārjuna argues that nothing has an ontologically stable identity independent of other phenomena. This interdependence is not merely causal, in the sense that we can never separate an entity’s existence from the rich network of conditions upon which it depends and which it in turn influences. More radically, it is conceptual: the nature of any particular thing under scrutiny is determined by the conventions, concerns, linguistic practices, etc. of those doing the scrutinizing. Any attempt to isolate a certain moment or node within the rich causal, conceptual, and linguistic networks that constitute

life as experienced, while claiming that this node has a nature existing independently from such networks, is mere reification and projection.

The notion of emptiness is thus not merely a report on our own cognitive limitations, that we have no cognitive access to what lies beneath the phenomena-as-experienced, as Locke speaks of substance in general or as Kant speaks of the thing-in-itself. Nor is it merely semantic, in that there are limits to the capacity of language to capture extra-linguistic reality. It is ultimately ontological. There is nothing there beneath the appearances. The notion of underlying, independently existing real entities that undergird the contents of phenomenal awareness is simply incoherent. We should underscore that this is not merely a kind of idealism, since there are no enduring, intrinsically existing minds that ground the world either. Subjects are as empty as the phenomena they experience.¹¹

Nāgārjuna's primary method to advance this point is argumentum ad absurdum: positing intrinsically existing entities leads to inescapable contradictions. He provides a wide array of arguments to the effect that various phenomena championed by philosophers (e.g., causation, motion, indwelling selves, substances that bear properties) lack svabhāva.¹² One of his major lines of argumentation may be summarized as follows:¹³

1. x enters into relations with other nodes within causal, conceptual, and linguistic networks.
2. x possesses intrinsic existence (svabhāva).

3. If something possesses intrinsic existence, then its fundamental identity is isolated from the networks of conditions (causal, conceptual, linguistic) within which it is embedded.
4. If something's fundamental identity is isolated from the networks of conditions (causal, conceptual, linguistic) within which it is embedded, then it does not enter into relations with other nodes of such networks.
5. Therefore, x does not enter into relations with other nodes of causal, conceptual, and linguistic networks.

The contradiction between premise 1 and the conclusion leads to the rejection of premise 2.

This lack of independent existence further entails that precisely discriminating some real entity, independent from the conditions within which it is embedded, is impossible.¹⁴ At best, we merely select certain features of the causal/cognitive nexus as most relevant to our concerns. The fact that Nāgārjuna preserves premise 1 underscores the fact that, despite the claims of his opponents, he does not intend his imputation of emptiness to be nihilistic. In fact, he argues, it is the very opposite: emptiness is a condition for something's being part of the common world of causal interaction.¹⁵

Nāgārjuna's arguments in support of emptiness are meant to undermine realists' attempts to gain purchase on a substantial external world and are thus skeptical in spirit. But they are not distinctively epistemological in form. In his *Dispeller of Disputes* (VV), however, Nāgārjuna takes direct aim at pramāṇa (knowledge-source) epistemology. The context of his

attack is a response to Nyāya realists. Naiyāyikas (Nyāya philosophers), as far back as the original Nyāya-sūtras (c. 200 CE), have taken the Madhyamaka position to be a kind of skeptical nihilism that is guilty of the self-referential incoherence mentioned above. They take emptiness to mean insubstantiality and claim that the Buddhist must either accept that there are non-empty pramānas, which support his assertions, or give up the attempt to prove his point. Nāgārjuna's response is twofold. First, he denies that he advances a robust thesis about the nature of a real external world, claiming "I have no thesis" (VV 29).¹⁶ Because of this, he claims to be innocent of the charge of self-contradiction. Second, and more aggressively, he turns the argument back on the realist, by arguing that the notion of pramānas as foundational sources of knowledge is unsustainable (31–51):

If you hold that the various objects are established by pramānas, then again, you must explain how it is that the pramānas are themselves established (31).¹⁷ If the pramānas were established by other pramānas, then there would be an infinite regress. Then, neither the beginning, middle, nor end would be established (32). But if you think that the pramānas are established without need for other pramānas, then your position (that claims about an object's existence or nature must be supported by appeal to pramānas) has been abandoned. There is inconsistency in this, and you must provide a specific reason for it (33).

So far, Nāgārjuna has presented two lemmas: an infinite regress of pramānas and the mere positing of pramānas without epistemic grounding, both of which are undesirable for the reasons he cites. Next, he presents a third lemma, beginning with the idea that the pramānas may be self-established. As opposed to being ungrounded, this option suggests that pramānas have the special power to provide epistemic support for themselves by dint of their own functioning. From our perspective, this option seems closest to a classical formulation of foundationalism: there are cognitive states that are both self-supporting and able to support other states. Nāgārjuna's interlocutor suggests that this may be akin to the way that a fire not only illuminates various objects but also itself.

After finding fault with the details of the fire analogy, Nāgārjuna argues:

If the pramānas are self-established, then the objects of knowledge are also independent (of the pramānas). For self-establishment is independent of any other thing (40). If the pramānas are established independently of their objects, then they would be the pramānas of nothing at all (41).

If the pramānas were truly self-established, this would exclude us from accounting for the veracity of, e.g., perception by appeal to the objects it normally reveals. Track-record arguments, familiar to reliabilist theories, would be off the table. The very notion of self-establishment would rule out such an appeal. Putting aside the practical question of how we could then discriminate legitimate knowledge sources from flawed imposters (perception vs.

mere hallucination), Nāgārjuna highlights the way in which this approach would sever the intimate tie between knowledge sources and their proper objects. I would suggest that this argument may be placed within the family of arguments directed against “the given” and, more precisely, against strong versions of foundationalism. Nāgārjuna’s contention is that, if foundational cognitive states were truly walled off from the support of other inputs, this wall would be impassable in both directions. The very act of insulating these foundational cognitive states makes them impotent as sources of epistemic support for any particular domain of putative objects or truth-claims. His argument may be understood in two distinct, but complementary ways. Epistemically, as we have seen, we would be unable to support the veracity of, e.g., perception by appealing to its track record of success. I could no longer say that perception reliably provides me cognitive access to “this tree right here” as I point to a tree in my backyard. Conceptually, if self-establishment is taken as a kind of logical atomism, then the concept of perception could not include its capacity to provide cognitive access to a distinct domain of physical objects. In his auto-commentary, Nāgārjuna remarks: “If they are to be pramāṇas of something, they cannot be independent of their objects.”

Given the way in which this lemma instantiates Nāgārjuna’s general attack on intrinsic existence, we now see a close connection between his critique of pramāṇa epistemology and his general philosophical project.

The fourth and final lemma is acceptance of the interdependence of pramāṇas and their objects:

If, conversely, you accept that “establishment of pramānas always occurs in reference to their proper objects,” there would be the establishment of what is already established. . . (42)

If the realist opts for a more holistic approach to the establishment of pramānas, allowing the objects of knowledge to play a role, then, in the course of justifying his views, appeal to knowledge sources would merely serve the purpose of reiterating what he already accepts. The existence of knowledge sources is presupposed, as they are what provide cognitive access to their proper objects. The existence of objects of knowledge is also presupposed, as they are what we appeal to in order to establish the existence and nature of knowledge sources.

In succeeding verses, Nāgārjuna argues that there is no way to escape this circularity in a way that salvages the realists’ project. They would have to hold that the objects of knowledge are established independently of the pramānas to use them as a non-circular ground for establishing the pramānas (43). But if this is the case, what need is there for appealing to pramānas in order to ground knowledge of the objects (44)? This strategy would, further, reverse the putative dependence relation between the sources and objects of knowledge (45). Proposing a complete circularity between them ends up establishing nothing (46). In conclusion, “the pramānas cannot be self-established, nor established by other pramānas, nor established by appeal to the objects of knowledge, nor established without reason” (51). And thus, they are unsuitable to play the foundational role assigned to them by the system-building realist philosophers.

It is important to see that Nāgārjuna's purpose here is not to refute commonplace epistemic practice, the use of perception, inference, testimony, and the like in navigating our daily lives (see Siderits 1980: 320). It is rather to refute the contention that the pramāṇas have the capacity to justify metaphysical realism.¹⁸ And this refutation, in consonance with traditional Buddhist attitudes, is meant to support a life aimed at enlightenment. The affirmation of emptiness, supported by skeptical argumentation, provides an ideative support for meditative praxis, meant to dislodge the tangled knots of reification and desire, and ultimately terminate in peace and freedom from suffering.¹⁹

4. Jayarāśi and the Materialist Tradition

The materialist tradition (Lokāyata, Cārvāka) is a noteworthy exception to the typically ascetical flavor of classical Indian philosophy.²⁰ Most of the original works of the materialists are unfortunately lost to us. We tend to find bits and pieces preserved by their rivals, who often represent them as interlocutors worthy of contemptuous dismissal. The materialists themselves dismissed the religious ambitions of other Indian schools (sometimes with quite humorous rhetoric), and their skepticism stems from their anti-religious and anti-speculative approach to the good life. There is no immortal soul. We have one life to live, and the best that life can offer is pleasure; all else is vanity. In a corresponding movement, personal experience is all that we can take seriously in matters of knowledge, while inference and testimony—the primary means to bolster claims about transcendent realities—are never

sources of knowledge proper.²¹ Against inference, materialists note that it relies on a recognized connection between an inferential sign and that which is signified (e.g., between smoke and fire). But for this sign to underwrite knowledge of the signified, it must be known to be invariably and non-accidentally connected to it. How do we acquire this knowledge? Not by perception, as it operates upon particulars in the present moment. Nor by inference, as this would trigger an infinite regress. Nor testimony; since it too relies on a connection between sign and signified, it would mirror the problems of inference. Furthermore, we can never be sure that apparently secure inferential relata are not merely accidentally and “locally” connected. Our ability to know is limited in scope. We lack the resources to refute the possibility of unknown causal factors that would engender deviation at some time or place.

Jayarāśi (c. 800 CE) is connected to the materialist tradition, though he seems willing to develop his own conclusions.²² One sign of his independence is that he takes the deep skeptical strand within materialism and expresses it across the board, attempting to refute leading analyses of knowledge and knowledge sources, including perception. He abandons the somewhat clumsy materialist formulation that “perception is the only legitimate knowledge source,” fraught with the potential for easy refutation, and devotes his work to a more sophisticated, skeptical vindication of ordinary life: “The philosophers’ technical categories being subverted, ordinary linguistic practices are appropriate, and should not be subject to critical examination” (my translation of text in Solomon 2010: 228). In the Tattvopaplavasimha (The Lion that Subverts all Philosophical Categories), his method is

straightforward “destructive” argumentation. For any technical view put forth by a philosopher (typically analyses of the major knowledge sources or key metaphysical tenets), he tries to illustrate that it is either patently false or inadmissible given the interlocutors’ own set of truth commitments.

By way of example, below is a summary of one his arguments against the analysis of testimony given by Nyāya: “testimony is an assertion by an authoritative speaker” (āpta-upadeśa śabdah; Nyāya-sūtra 1.1.7), where “authoritative” is meant to convey a speaker’s own veridical cognition of some fact and an honest willingness to convey it to another.

1. Granting provisionally that there is a property, authoritativeness, possessed by some persons, it would underwrite the positive epistemic status of testimonial beliefs either by (a) its mere existence, devoid of any particular production of testimonial knowledge, or (b) its actual production of testimonial knowledge.
2. Option (a) cannot be the case, since authoritativeness cannot be a cause of positive epistemic status if it is causally unproductive.
3. Regarding (b), authoritativeness would have to produce knowledge either (c) by itself or (d) with the help of auxiliary causal factors.
 - 3a. Option (c) is not appropriate, as you (Nyāya) do not accept it. And in any case, it would contradict the experience of causal fluctuations that are attributed to the influence of auxiliary causal factors.

- 3b. If you hold (d), then authoritativeness is neither necessary nor sufficient for the production of veridical testimonial cognition. Consider the statement “the boy has nava blankets” (the Sanskrit term nava could be understood to mean “new” or “nine”). Seeing a boy with a new blanket, an authoritative person may utter the above statement. Owing to auxiliary causal factors that beset the listener, however, his statement produces the false cognition “the boy has nine blankets.” Similarly, a person intent on deception may say “the boy has nine blankets,” but owing to auxiliary causal factors, his statement produces for a listener the true cognition “the boy has a new blanket.”
4. Therefore, the Nyāya analysis “testimony is an assertion by an authoritative speaker” fails.

This is but one example. But Jayarāśi’s contention is that such destructive argumentation is possible for any and every technical definition put forth by dogmatic philosophers.

5. Śrīharṣa and Nondual Vedānta

The final skeptic we will consider is Śrīharṣa (c. 1150), a thinker within the school of Advaita (“Nondual”) Vedānta, living roughly four centuries after Śaṅkarācārya, the figure who gave definitive form to the school and whose works serve as its systematic foundation.²³ Vedānta is a Hindu school, or rather a large family of sub-schools, devoted to interpreting the Upaniṣadic

scriptures as well as articulating a coherent, defensible metaphysics that makes sense of the Upaniṣadic view of the world. The Upaniṣads are heterogeneous and unsystematic in nature, but a common theme that emerges is that the various objects of ordinary experience are ontologically dependent upon and find their ultimate value as derivative of the fundamental ground of being, Brahman. Realizing Brahman—in large measure, realizing our own intimate relationship with it—is considered the key to achieving supreme felicity and liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

The various sub-schools of Vedānta fall into two major (and hostile) camps, realism and nondualism, based on their interpretation of the nature of Brahman and the dependence relation between Brahman and the world. The realists affirm the existence of a mind-independent world but suggest that, without reflection upon Upaniṣadic teachings, we remain ignorant of the way in which it is sustained and pervaded by Brahman, which is understood as a God-like being. Nondual Vedānta is contrastingly a monist idealism. For the nondualists, Brahman is a homogeneous, unified, self-aware consciousness. The world of common experience, which presupposes multiplicity, is ultimately unreal, a persistent illusion, as is the notion of a creator God. The world is grounded in Brahman in the sense that everything, even illusion, is grounded in awareness. The difference between the two camps may also be understood in their interpretation of Brahman's totality. The Upaniṣads hold that Brahman is everything. For realists, this means that Brahman undergirds, unifies, and makes coherent the multiplicity of real objects in the world; for nondualists, this means that the only real thing is homogeneous conscious awareness; all else is ultimately illusion.²⁴ While it is outside the

scope of this study, we should also note there are historical and conceptual continuities between Madhyamaka Buddhism and Nondual Vedānta in spite of the fact that the former is anti-Vedic and the latter is among the more orthodox of the Vedic Hindu traditions.

This nondualist view is sometimes advanced through sophisticated epistemological arguments that combine a notion of cognitive sublation (bādhā) with the self-illumination/justification of conscious awareness. A cognitive state is sublated when it is defeated or undermined by a contrary awareness (e.g., an illusion of a man in the distance is sublated by expert testimony that the thing in question is a tree stump). A key nondualist contention is that all contentful awareness is in principle capable of being sublated, but unqualified awareness simpliciter is not. This is because all sublation takes place within the domain of awareness. To put it slightly differently, while any particular cognitive presentation may be doubted, the fact of conscious awareness cannot. And such unqualified awareness is taken to be identical to Brahman, the ultimate ground of being.²⁵ This argument provides a helpful way to conceptualize Śrīharṣa's project in his dialectical masterpiece, the Khandanakhandakhādyā (The Sweets of Refutation): while Descartes's skepticism is the first half of a two-part movement that erodes conviction in the external world, pivots on the indubitability of conscious self-awareness, and rediscovers the world on more secure footing, Śrīharṣa simply stops at the end of the first movement. He seeks to undermine any positive, contentful cognition (belief, proposition, etc.), such that the only thing left standing is unqualified, homogeneous conscious awareness itself (again, equated with Brahman, the

ground of being revealed in the Upaniṣads). As Phillips (1995: 88) puts it, he would “back into success” by refuting any view that asserts the reality of multiplicity.

In support of this objective, Śrīharṣa argues against a wide variety of philosophical views, commitments, and theses (including, for example, a scathing attack on universals). Like Jayarāśi, he often sets the views of a philosopher or school against themselves, in support of his contention that that systematic realism cannot be maintained.²⁶ He succinctly expresses this in the claim that “all technical analyses are untenable (sarvāni lakṣanāni anupapannāni)” (see Granoff 1978: 23, and Jha 1986: 82). Harkening back to our discussion of the purely destructive mode of debate (vitandā), Nicholson (2009: 94) suggests that it “achieves its most developed expression” in the work of Śrīharṣa, who contends that any understanding of reality, pre-theoretic or philosophical, which considers distinctness (bheda) real, collapses under philosophical scrutiny. Śrīharṣa explicitly states that the basic form of his arguments may be modified in order to attack against positions that he doesn’t directly address, and thus used as modes, so to speak, in the continued refutation of realism.²⁷

We may recall that Indian realists contend that a complete denial of knowledge sources is impossible, as any thesis put forth (including the skeptical hypothesis) must derive its probative force from somewhere (see note 6). One way to express this contention is that one cannot engage in philosophical debate without at least tacitly accepting that there are knowledge sources that determine the legitimacy of argumentative moves and provide for the rules by which defeat and victory may be objectively recognized. This would, of course, undermine Śrīharṣa’s program from the start. Naturally, he tasks himself with deflecting this

charge.²⁸ In short, his response is as follows: it would be misleading for the realist to cast Śrīharṣa's own position as starting from a denial of knowledge sources. He is, rather, uncommitted to the truth of their existence. All he claims to possess, and all that that is needed to debate their legitimacy, is an idea or notion of knowledge sources, and indeed, not prior knowledge of their existence. He need no investment in their reality or in a theory that ties them to an external world of causal conditions. Clearly, those who attack the legitimacy of knowledge sources (identified by Śrīharṣa as Mādhyamika Buddhists, Cārvāka materialists, and Advaita Vedāntins) participate in philosophical discussion and debate. This gives the lie to the notion that accepting knowledge sources is a prerequisite for dialectical engagement. And further, the realists themselves engage in vigorous, extensive debate with skeptics! Clearly they themselves do not in fact accept the rule that debate must require a preliminary acceptance of knowledge sources.

How then, is the debate between the skeptics and the realists to be prosecuted? What undergirds what we take to be the standards of success and failure in debate? Śrīharṣa argues that it is simply a set of agreed-upon rules. This is the only thing that both sides must accept for debate to occur. And such rules are a matter of convention and nothing more; certainly they need not be objects of knowledge. Accepting those debate-governing conventions that have passed the test of time and seem to function effectively is the baseline requirement for two parties to engage in debate effectively. Śrīharṣa deftly supports this line of argumentation by reflection on our general epistemic condition: our action-guiding cognitive resources are as a rule usually far below the standards of ultima facie justified knowledge. All of us, realists

included, must rely on cognitions that are themselves unverified and therefore, provisional, on pain of infinite regress. And relying on these, without any sense of deep conviction or pretense to knowledge, is all the skeptic needs to engage in debate and, indeed, to leverage his attack on knowledge itself.^{29,30}

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¹ See Frenkian (1957) and Flintoff (1980) for arguments that Pyrrho was indeed influenced by Indian philosophers. McEvilley (1982) identifies a number of remarkable similarities between dialectical tropes within Pyrrhonism and Madhyamaka Buddhist thought, though he ultimately remains dubious of Indian influence. For concise appraisals of the issue see Hankinson (1995: 58–64) and Bett (2000: 169–178).

² The famous creation hymn (Nāsadīya sūkta) of the Ṛg Veda (10.129) contains a delightfully skeptical conclusion regarding the ultimate nature of the cosmos.

³ "Hinduism" is a problematic term for various reasons, including the fact that it refers to hundreds of philosophical and religious movements under a single heading. For our purposes, it refers to persons

and traditions that accept the authority of the Vedas—if only nominally—along with allied texts, cultural norms, and practices. It primarily serves the purpose of distinguishing these groups from those which explicitly rejected the authority of the Vedic tradition, including Buddhists, Jainas, and Cārvāka materialists. By “Upaniṣadic Hinduism” I refer to an influential strain of Hindu thought that takes many of the motivations and concerns of the śramaṇa period and incorporates them into the Vedic ritual tradition, in the spirit of reformation and not outright rejection.

⁴ See Matilal (1986) and Mohanty (2000: 11–40) for introductions to pramāna theory.

⁵ See Solomon (1976: chs. 1–3) for evidence of the primacy of debate within a number of ancient Indian traditions of thought. Matilal (1998: 32) suggests that debate was “a preferred form of rationality” in classical India. See Matilal (1986: 80–93; 1998: 32–59) for further discussion.

⁶ Considerations of space prevent us from extensively considering responses to skepticism by Indian realists. This short aside will have to suffice: the self-contradiction alleged may be couched in various ways, including self-referential incoherence and pragmatic self-contradiction. In simpler versions, dating at least to the earliest commentary on the Nyāya-sūtra, the realist argues that since views cannot be advanced without reliance upon knowledge sources, the skeptic’s position is abandoned in the very act of making his case. Likewise, one proffering an argument must have some objective or concern that he holds to be normatively binding. The skeptic must either admit this, betraying his skepticism, or be dismissed as a purposeless madman (see Matilal 1986: 87 and Ganeri 2001: 11). In more sophisticated versions, the realist argues that the very concept of falsehood is parasitical on truth and therefore doubt cannot be motivated without an acknowledged background of true cognition (see Dasti 2012). Other anti-skeptical arguments are pragmatic in tone: we appeal to knowledge sources (and engage in epistemological reflection upon them) because we want to be guided well in support of our goals in life. A priori skepticism would stultify us from the outset, undermining this very project (see Phillips 2012: 18–19).

⁷ Phillips (1995: 15) suggests that Nāgārjuna was a catalyst for the “professionalization within all Indian schools” of this time, as his dialectical attacks provoked them into “rethinking [their core positions] and tighter argumentation.”

⁸ The terms mādhyaṃika and madhyamaka refer to an individual or group devoted to the “middle way,” a term commonly used by Buddhists to describe the Buddhist lifestyle. It has come to be specifically identified with the tradition that traces itself to Nāgārjuna. In his earliest sermons, the Buddha characterizes his path as a middle way between excessive renunciation and excessive hedonism. Elsewhere, he describes his attitude toward the reality of the world as a middle way between the complete affirmation of being and its complete denial. Nagarjuna (MMK 15.7) directly cites the sermon where this latter notion is put forth, and, as Garfield (1990: 223) notes, this usage sets the stage for Nāgārjuna’s rejection of both metaphysical realism and nihilism in favor of the “middle way” of conventionalism. See Huntington (1989), Siderits (2007: 180–207), and Westerhoff (2009), for philosophically oriented introductions to the school. See Garfield (1995), Siderits and Katsura (2013), and Westerhoff (2010) for translation and commentary on the texts that are central to this study.

⁹ MMK 15.2 holds that svabhāva is unconstructed (akrtrimah) and not dependent on something else (nirapekṣah paratra). See Westerhoff (2009: 19–52) for a study of the primary Mādhyamika understandings of svabhāva. A helpful characterization that Westerhoff borrows from Tibetan commentators on Nāgārjuna is that something possessing svabhāva would have to exist “from its own side” and thus independently of our conceptual engagement with it. Tillemans (2001: 9) argues that for Nāgārjuna, the two central aspects of svabhāva, “findability under analysis” (something like conceptual irreducibility) and causal independence, are mutually entailing.

¹⁰ Dependent co-origination was originally put forth by the Buddha as an account of the factors that collectively perpetuate a personality stream’s continued misconception and suffering, binding it to continued rebirth in saṃsāra. According to this notion, there is no original, fundamental cause of our existence, but a self-perpetuating cycle of mutually dependent causes. We should underscore that while Nāgārjuna’s usage is tied to the original notion, he clearly develops it according to his own philosophical understanding.

¹¹ This is the primary concern of Chapter 8 of MMK.

¹² Westerhoff (2009) catalogues a number of these arguments.

¹³ For examples of the reasoning captured in this argument, see MMK 13.4–6; 15.2; 20.17; 21.17; 22.22; 24.38.

¹⁴ MMK 18.10 therefore states: “Whatever comes into being dependent on another is not identical to that thing. Nor is it different from it” (translation by Garfield 1995: 252). This theme is developed in Chapter 10 of MMK.

¹⁵ MMK 1.10; 15.8–9; 24.7–20, 36.

¹⁶ I will cite specific passages of this text by verse number. See Westerhoff (2010: 63–65) for a concise discussion of this enigmatic disavowal.

¹⁷ Translations are mine unless otherwise noted. I have used the Sanskrit manuscript of the Dispeller of Disputes by Yonezawa (2008). Note that derivations of the verbal roots sidh and sādh are used in this passage, conveying the notion of accomplishment or establishment. Here they convey a sense of epistemic establishment or proof.

¹⁸ On these grounds, Siderits (1988; 2003: 150–153) argues against using the label “skeptical” for Nāgārjuna and that he is better understood as an anti-realist devoted to undermining correspondence theories of truth and foundationalist epistemologies. Without disagreeing with his cogent analysis of Nāgārjuna’s motivations or anti-realist sensibility, I would contest that the convention of calling Nāgārjuna a skeptic (e.g., Matilal 1986 passim) is appropriate, so long as it is understood within the context of his philosophical project. In defense of this, a few remarks are in order. I would suggest that the definition Siderits provides of a paradigmatic skeptic is too narrow. To paraphrase, he defines the skeptic as one who agrees with the realists that there is a theory that best captures reality, but denies that we are capable of achieving it. As an anti-realist conventionalist, Nāgārjuna would then reject the very realist pretensions that give rise to skepticism. But given Siderits’s definition one could even call into question whether Sextus Empiricus is a skeptic. By modus tollens, then, the definition must be too narrow. To elaborate: like Nāgārjuna, Sextus seeks to undermine confidence that an objective theory of

reality is even possible as he repeatedly calls attention to the fact that particular phenomena are experienced in radically different ways according to the presuppositions and cognitive backgrounds of the subject. Anyone arguing in favor of her own perspective would do so from within it and thus still be part of the dispute (PH 1.112). Sextus further deploys argumentative tropes akin to those of Nāgārjuna (e.g., the two modes; PH 1.78–79) that are meant to undermine any standard by which the nature of the world may be definitely adjudicated. We may, therefore, speak of Nāgārjuna as a skeptic as we do of Sextus, insofar as he argues that pretensions to objective knowledge of a mind-independent reality are unjustifiable, fruitless, and incoherent. Knowledge of that sort is not possible. In this way, just as Sextus allows for individuals to adopt conduct-governing standards while disavowing opinions regarding the true nature of things (PH 1.21–24), Nāgārjuna would allow for a limited sort of appeal to “knowledge sources” for the needs of common life, while explicitly denying that he maintains any thesis about the real nature of the world (VV 29). I would conclude, therefore, that given the range of meanings associated with “skeptic,” it is not misleading, and is indeed, appropriate for Nāgārjuna, as long as it is understood in the context of his broader project. For a more developed comparison between Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonian skepticism, see Dreyfus and Garfield (2011).

¹⁹ Huntington (1989: 78–83) and Westerhoff (2009: 13) underscore the fact that in Madhyamaka thought theoretical reflection must be conjoined with contemplative practice.

²⁰ The first chapter of the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, a medieval Indian doxography, is devoted to a reconstruction of the materialist view: see Agrawal (2002). For translations of Jayarāśi’s central work, see Franco (1994) and Solomon (2010). For an article length study of Jayarāśi, see Balcerowicz (2011).

²¹ While this is a common characterization of the materialist view, examining extant fragments of commentaries on the *Cārvākasūtras* (*Sūtras on Materialism*), Bhattacharya (2011) illustrates that some materialists are willing to allow inference to stand as a source of knowledge, so long as it is entirely grounded upon and derivative of perceptual experience.

²² See Balcerowicz (2011: sect. 1.4) for a succinct summary of available evidence regarding Jayarāśi’s relationship to the materialist school.

²³ See Granoff (1978) and Phillips (1995) for influential studies of Śrīharṣa. See Jha (1986) for a translation of his central work. Ram-Prasad (2002) has a number of insightful essays on Śrīharṣa. See Potter (1981) for an introduction to early Advaita Vedānta. See Ganeri (2011: 127 n. 12), however, for a suggestion that the evidence for Śrīharṣa’s connection to the Nondualist school is weaker than often claimed.

²⁴ The use of “ultimate” is important here. Classical Nondualism tends to speak of the objects of ordinary experience as conventionally real, but ultimately unreal. As opposed to a married bachelor, which is unequivocally false, the computer in my office is conventionally real, even if ultimately illusory. Nondualists therefore tend to use a third category (other than “real” or “unreal”) for objects that are merely conventionally or phenomenally real; they are “indeterminate” (*anirvacanīya*). See Ram-Prasad (2002) for a study of this notion, which deftly ties its development to Indian debates over epistemology and metaphysical realism.

²⁵ Deutsch (1969: 15–26) provides a clear explication of this notion. Phillips (1995: 78–81) discusses its development in Śrīharṣa. For translation of the relevant passages, see Jha (1986: 25–57).

²⁶ Given this project (and with noteworthy affinities to Nāgārjuna), a central target of Śrīharṣa’s attacks is the Nyāya school. Phillips (1995) illustrates the way in which Śrīharṣa’s criticisms were a primary catalyst for the rise of “New Nyāya,” which defends traditional Nyāya positions with increased analytic rigor and refinement.

²⁷ See Jha (1986: 704). For Śrīharṣa’s explicit appeal to the legitimacy of *vitandā*, see Jha (1986: 30–31). Extended discussion of this feature of Śrīharṣa’s argument is not possible in this paper, but see Granoff (1978: 1–69) for an example and analysis of his method, applied to the analyses of knowledge provided by his interlocutors.

²⁸ See Jha (1986: 3–24). Also see Granoff (1978: 71–83).

²⁹ Considerations of space preclude discussion of Śrīharṣa’s use of Gettier-style counterexamples to undermine Nyāya definitions of knowledge. This would, of course, be a natural point of resonance with contemporary epistemology. For further discussion, see Matilal (1986: 135–137) and Ganeri (2011: 127–130).

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