



Skepticism in Early Indian Thought

Author(s): John M. Koller

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Skepticism has not been warmly received by Indian philosophers over the ages. Although there are many references to skeptics (*ajñānikāḥ*) scattered throughout Indian literature, and despite the fact that a school of skepticism known variously as Lokāyata, Bārhaspatya, or Cārvāka is acknowledged by the orthodox systems of philosophy, there is very little surviving philosophical literature of skepticism. The *Tattvopaplavasīnha*, a seventh century A.D. treatise by Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa, is the “only extant treatise which may be considered an authentic text of the school.”¹ The other source of Cārvāka is the brief summary given by Madhva in the *Sarva-darśana-saṅgraha*—a source we will use as a point of departure.

According to Madhva, the Cārvākans did not accept the doctrine of another world or the survival of death; they accepted only *artha* and *kāma* as human aims or values, rejecting *mokṣa* and *dharma*; and they accepted only perception as a means of valid knowledge. Madhva admitted the broad appeal of the Cārvākan philosophy, opening his summary of Cārvāka with these lines:

The efforts of Cārvāka are indeed hard to be eradicated, for the majority of living beings hold by the current refrain—

While life is yours, live joyously;
None can escape Death’s searching eye:
When once this frame of ours they burn,
How shall it e’er again return?

The mass of men, in accordance with the *Śāstras* of policy and enjoyment, considering wealth and desire the only ends of man and denying the existence of any object belonging to a future world, are found to follow only the doctrine of Cārvāka. Hence another name for that school is Lokāyata,—a name well accordant with the thing signified. [‘Lokāyata’ means ‘philosophy of the people’ and also ‘worldly philosophy’.]²

Madhva’s account emphasizes the epistemological basis of the Cārvāka position. Perception does not reveal the presence of a soul or the existence of a world where one is reborn or the possibility of liberation; but perception is the only valid means of knowledge. Suppose, argues the Cārvākan, that inference is taken as a valid means of knowledge. This means that it must be possible to know that the middle term—which is found in the minor—must be invariably concomitant (*vyāpti*) with the major. But how is this concomitance (*vyāpti*) known?

Vyāpti cannot be known by perception, “. . . for although it is possible that the actual contact of the senses and the object will produce the knowledge of the particular object thus brought in contact, yet as there can never be such contact in the case of the past or the future, the universal proposition which was to embrace the invariable connection of the middle and major terms in every case becomes impossible to be known.”³ The argument clearly assumes

that perception is of particulars and that no number of perceived particulars can establish the necessary connection required for valid inference.

Inference as a means of knowing *vyāpti* is dismissed with the sentence, “Nor can inference be the means of knowledge of the universal proposition, since in the case of this inference we should also require another inference to establish it, and so on, and hence would arise the fallacy of an *ad infinitum* retrogression.”⁴

After a brief discussion of why testimony (*śabda*) and comparison (*upamāna*) cannot be a valid means of knowing the universal connection required for valid inference (they involve both perception and inference which can neither by themselves nor jointly establish the requisite necessary connection), Madhva’s summary has the Cārvākan declare: “Hence by the impossibility of knowing the universality of a proposition it becomes impossible to establish inference, &c.”⁵

Apparently moving from the proposition ‘x cannot be known’ to the proposition ‘x does not exist’ (which inference cannot be a valid means of knowledge by his own reasoning), the Cārvākan declares, “Hence it follows that there is no other hell than mundane pain produced by purely mundane causes, as thorns, &c; the only Supreme is the earthly monarch whose existence is proved by all the world’s eyesight; and the only Liberation is the dissolution of the body.”⁶

The Cārvākan could easily have avoided the obvious fallacy of claiming that because something could not be known to exist, therefore, it did not exist. But it seems that he could not avoid undermining his own position—that perception is the only valid means of knowledge—once he attempted to prove its correctness, for proof requires inference. Two alternatives are available. Either he could admit inference as a valid means of knowledge, and thereby avoid the embarrassment of attempting to establish by inference that inference is not a valid means of knowledge, or else he could make no claims at all, refusing to recognize even perception as a valid means of knowledge. Both of these positions were, in fact, adopted. The former is exemplified by Purandara and the latter by Jayarāśi.

Purandara, a seventh century Cārvākan, also denies the validity of inference as a means of knowing what is beyond the possibility of experience. But he accepts inference as a valid means of knowing when it is restricted to the realm of the experienceable—presumably because perception provides a means of testing the correctness of inferential knowledge claims so limited. According to Kamalaśīla, “Purandara says that it is well known that even the Cārvākans accept inference although they object to anyone employing inference beyond the limits of perceptual experience.”⁷

The reason Purandara refused to accept inference as a valid means of knowing anything not in principle perceivable seems to be that he claimed *vyāpti* (concomitance: “pervasion”) could not be establish beyond the limits of experience. Commenting on Purandara’s statement that “it is difficult to

determine (the existence of transcendent) objects by means of inference,” Vādideva says, “since in transcendent proofs (*tantrasiddheṣu*, *lit.* what is proved in religious texts) the basis for inference is absent unlike in the case of perceptual inferences, a knowledge of transcendent objects cannot be had (Nyāyyo, *lit.* inferred) by them.”⁸

Both the Cārvākans, who like Purandara admitted perception plus inference, limited knowledge to what is in principle experienceable, and those who, according to Madhva, accepted only perception took their epistemological stand on perception. In so doing they left themselves open to two questions: (1) How is the validity of perception as a means of knowledge known? and (2) How can the invalidity of any other means of knowledge be established by perception?

The question of proving the validity of perception as a means of knowledge was central to a third school of Cārvākans represented by Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa. In the *Tattvopaplavasīmha* (‘upsetting of all principles’), he argues that no means of knowledge can be proved to be valid. Purandara and the other Cārvākans coupled their epistemological skepticism to a metaphysical dogmatism, uncritically accepting that material objects exist and are apprehended by the senses as they exist in themselves. Jayarāśi’s skepticism is more thoroughgoing, challenging perception and the claim to know that there are material objects.

The skepticism of the materialist has its basis in the twin assumptions that material objects exist and that they are perceived as they exist. But Jayarāśi observes that there are no valid grounds for affirming the existence of the material elements (earth, water, fire, and air), for if perception is the only valid means of knowledge, then perception would have to be the source of our knowledge of their existence. But how is it known that perception reveals objects as they exist in themselves? Obviously perception cannot be the means of knowing the validity of perception; but the other means of knowledge have already been successfully challenged. Thus, not accepting the proved existence of the material elements, no basis is available for the assumption that sense contact with their objects is revelatory of the real world.

Like any thoroughgoing skeptic, Jayarāśi cannot claim a metaphysical basis by means of which he can oppose various metaphysical and epistemological theories by means of alternative assumptions; his skepticism does not allow him to claim knowledge of metaphysical truths. Instead, like Sextus Empiricus and Nāgārjuna, he meets his philosophical opponents on their own ground and shows them that their claims to knowledge are not tenable on their own assumptions. His procedure is to take the opponent’s claims to know that certain means of knowledge are valid means of knowledge and to examine them. He does not say that he knows that perception is not a valid means of knowledge. Rather, he takes up a particular claim, like the Nyāya account of perception—“Perception arises from contact between sense-organ and object, is determinate, non-erroneous and non-erratic”⁹ and analyzes it. In this case

the crucial concept in the definition is that of the non-erroneousness of perception. How is this non-erroneousness known? If perception is of objects, then since the erroneousness or non-erroneousness of perception is not an object, it cannot be perceived. But non-erroneousness cannot be inferred, for the basis of such an inference would have to be grounded in perception, making the argument circular. The other recognized means of knowledge, such as testimony (*śabda*) and comparison (*upamāna*), are also shown to be less than demonstrably valid, and therefore cannot be used to prove that perception is a non-erroneous means of knowledge. The result is that the non-erroneousness of perception cannot be proved by any of the recognized means of knowledge, and therefore, assuming the validity of the arguments, no valid means of knowledge has been proven.¹⁰

Jayarāṣi takes this one step further, arguing that since we do not know whether there are any valid means of knowledge, therefore, we cannot claim to know that material objects exist. This destroys the dogmatism of his religious and metaphysical opponents who, on the basis of testimony (*śabda*) and inference (*anumāna*), claimed the existence of a soul, a life after death, another world, etc. At the same time, this argument undercuts the dogmatism of the materialist who bases both his skepticism of nonperceptual means of knowledge and his denial of the existence of nonmaterial things on the unprovable assumption that perception reveals the existence of material things. Of course, not admitting any valid means of knowledge, Jayarāṣi cannot himself claim to know what exists or does not exist, or what is the right way or wrong way of acting, without subjecting himself to the same criticisms he has directed at the materialist and spiritualist dogmatists.

This raises an interesting question about the basis of skepticism itself. The skeptic rejects his opponent's knowledge claims and recommends suspension of judgment because the evidence supporting the claims to knowledge is inadequate. But how does he *know* that the evidence is inadequate? The skeptic's paradox is this: If he does not know that the evidence for knowledge claims is inadequate, he has no reasons for his skepticism. But if he does know, then clearly he accepts (operationally, at least) a satisfiable criterion of adequate evidence, and, to this extent is not a skeptic.

Based on this analysis, complete skepticism is a contradiction in terms, for skepticism requires knowledge that the criteria for valid knowledge have not been satisfied. To claim that the criteria *cannot* be satisfied destroys the rational basis of the skeptic's position.

A limited or partial skepticism, on the other hand, may be seen as an attempt to call attention to the criteria that valid knowledge claims must satisfy and to the difficulty of satisfying these criteria, challenging various accepted criteria along the way. The earliest expressions of skepticism in Indian thought indicate that it is born out of the chaos of conflicting knowledge claims with the aid of developing conceptions of valid means of knowledge and criteria of epistemo-

logical evidence. Arthur B. Keith suggests that philosophy in India shows its beginnings in the expression of skepticism and proceeds to indicate Vedic passages that challenge or call into question established opinions and accepted answers.¹¹

For example, the existence of Indra—chief of gods—appears to be questioned in *Rg-Veda* 8.89: “Striving for Strength bring forth a laud to Indra, a truthful hymn if in truth he existeth. One and another say, ‘There is no Indra. Who hath beheld him? Whom then shall we honour?’”¹²

Doubt about Indra’s existence is expressed here—even though as has been argued, it is the doubt of persons whose views are not accepted by the author of the text. To say, “There is no Indra. Who hath beheld him?” suggests that since he has not been witnessed there is no basis for admitting his existence. This clearly emphasizes the primacy of experience as a means of knowledge and suggests skepticism of claims not grounded in perception.

Rg-Veda 9.112 might be interpreted as skepticism and ridicule of the gods—Indra in particular—augmented by recommending a life of wealth and pleasure:

“Varied truly are our thoughts. Varied are the ways of men. The joiner wants to find a breakage, the medicine-man an accident, the brahmin-priest a worshipper. O Indu, flow round for Indra.

“I’m poet, dad is medicine-man, mama is grinding at the mill. With varied thoughts intent on gain we follow after wealth of cows. O Indu, flow round for Indra.

“The horse an easy car to draw, the troop of lovers jest and laugh, the frog wants too a water-pool. O Indu, flow round for Indra.”¹³

Although one can read skepticism into this text, the text is most directly a recognition that people are motivated by the prospect of gain. If this is skepticism, it is skepticism about the propriety of idealistic or religious goals for human beings, who are naturally motivated by gain. There is no clear evidence of involvement of any epistemological skepticism.

Rg-Veda 10.81–87, however, does raise the question of means and criteria of valid knowledge. 10.81.4 asks from what stuff heaven and earth were fashioned, and then admonishes the seeker, “You wise ones, with your wisdom inquire into that, upon what base he rested, establishing the worlds.” In 10.82.3 Viśvakarman is identified as Father, Generator and Disposer, “. . . who knows all places and creatures, who is the sole name-giver of the gods, to him other beings go to ask him.” But four stanzas later, “You shall not find him, who created these (worlds); something else has come between you (and him). Enveloped in fog and chatter, walk the reciters of hymns, the robbers of lives.”¹⁴

The injunction to inquire with wisdom into the basis for the establishment of the world suggests that faith and scriptural testimony were not the only means recognized for achieving knowledge about these things. “Inquiry with wisdom” may well suggest that rational or theoretic activity was regarded as a valid means of knowledge. However, it should be noted that in *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*

1.29, Yama warns Naciketa that self-realization cannot be gotten through reasoning (“*Naiṣā tarkena matirāpaneyā*”). In *Kaṭha* 2.3.12, Yama says that the innermost self cannot be apprehended by speech, sight, or mind. Clearly, ordinary perception and inference were not regarded as adequate for “knowing” *Brahman*.

10.82.7 suggests that the priests who recited the hymns could not be counted on to direct one to the knowledge of the establishment of the world. This might well mean that the authority of the priestly tradition was no longer regarded as an adequate means of knowledge. Accusing them of being enveloped in fog and chatter, really only cheats and robbers, is not consistent with accepting their doctrines as valid knowledge. Furthermore, these passages not only suggest skepticism about the truth of the Vedic tradition; but also about certain means of coming to know these truths.

In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Naciketa refers to skepticism regarding survival of death when he says to Yama (Lord of Death), “There is this doubt in regard to a man who has departed, some (holding) that he is and some that he is not. I would be instructed by thee in this knowledge.”¹⁵ Yama’s reply acknowledges long-standing skepticism about the possibility of surviving death: “Even the gods of old had doubt on this point,” he says, requesting Naciketa not to ask for this boon.¹⁶ In light of Yama’s subsequent caution that the self cannot be apprehended by perception or reasoning, we may take the *Kaṭha* to acknowledge not only skepticism about certain beliefs (life after death), but also skepticism of certain means of knowledge, namely, perception and reasoning.

Rg-Veda 10.121 may be taken to express skepticism about which god is responsible for which function in the universe and therefore deserving of homage. After asking a series of questions about origins and powers of existence through the first eight verses—each concluding with the question, “To what god shall we do homage with oblation?”—we arrive at the ninth and final verse: “May he harm us not, who is the father of the earth, or who produced the heaven, he of unfailing ordinance, and who produced the mighty shining waters; to what god shall we do homage with oblation?”¹⁷

At a minimum this text raises the question of whether the usual assignment of different functions to the various gods is correct. What would underlie such a doubt about the correctness of the assignment? It could be doubt about the efficacy of the ritual or doubt about the reliability of tradition as a means of knowledge. However, even if the efficacy of the ritual is not being challenged, to question the correctness of the assignment of functions to the god presupposes awareness of criteria that would count for or against a particular claim. It might be no more than an expression of a view something like this: “No one has seen the gods performing their functions. How, then, do we know that Varuṇa is lord of the waters and Indra lord of the lightning?” But even if the doubt behind this text is no more than this, it is still significant, for the

assignment of specific functions to various gods had the authority of the priestly tradition behind it, implying that priestly tradition here was being challenged as a means of valid knowledge.

This would mark a significant step on the path to a rational theory of knowledge, for in the theology of the Brāhmaṇas, scriptural texts are regarded as the fundamental source and the ultimate criterion of knowledge. The texts are declared to be eternal, not composed by the seers, but “seen” and “heard” by them through insight and intuition. Knowledge claims that cannot be reconciled with the sacred texts are rejected as false, and skepticism can be overcome by showing agreement with scriptural statements.

On this view, inquiry begins with doubt (*vicikitsā*) and ends in “correct” interpretation of sacred texts. But the emphasis on correct interpretation of scripture in the Brāhmaṇas and on appropriate ritual analogies in the Āraṇyakas naturally led to increased emphasis on rational speculation as a means of establishing criteria of correctness of interpretations and appropriateness of analogies, and, eventually, by the time of the Upaniṣads, to the acceptance of rational speculation as a valid way of knowledge.

Although the attitudes and lines of thought pursued in these Vedic passages contain expressions of doubt and suggest a growing awareness of the importance of epistemological evidence, they fall far short of skepticism, in the sense of a rational and systematic position challenging the adequacy of any such assumed means of knowledge as found in Jayarāṣi or Sextus Empiricus.

There is, however, one Vedic text which may very well represent an extremely early school of skepticism. The text in question is the famous *Nāsadīya* hymn of *Rg-Veda* 10.129, which reveals an epistemologically grounded skepticism. The concluding lines of this remarkable statement are: “This creation, whence it came into being, whether it was established [created], or whether not-he who is its overseer in the highest heaven, he verily knows, or per chance he knows not.”¹⁸

Although Jwala Prasad claims that this text is not skeptical, but only raises questions and confesses ignorance, the thought expressed in the last two lines goes further than he admits.¹⁹ The sense of the text, if I may paraphrase, is this: “If the origin of the universe can be known, then surely its overseer in highest heaven would know. But maybe even he doesn’t know.” If anyone is in an “ideal knower” position, it is the “overseer in highest heaven.” But if we cannot be sure that he has knowledge of the origin of the universe, then perhaps knowledge of the origin of the universe is not possible. This is much more than confession of ignorance of simply raising a question. It is precisely the raising of the skeptical question, “Is knowledge of the origin of the universe possible?”

Clearly, since the gods would be in a privileged knowing position, they could be expected to know the origins of the world. But even the gods could not observe the coming-to-be of the world since they came into being later.

Observing something is a sure way of knowing; not being there to observe means not knowing for sure. At a minimum the passage suggests entitlement to doubt in the absence of observation.

The author's own view is a rational combination of other views, combining being and nonbeing and spirit and matter in his theory of origin. That he takes a skeptical attitude to his own theory too, shows that although metaphysical speculation was an accepted way of knowing, it did not provide proof of correctness. The ground of this skepticism is the argument (not perception) that without observation of the event in question one cannot be certain about it. Although this goes beyond the text itself, it appears that the author's skepticism of the various received answers to the question of how the universe originated is based on his rejection of any valid means of knowledge other than perception.

Yet, since we do not have the author's analysis of the various means of knowledge and his reasons for rejecting them, we cannot be sure that his position is really skeptical or whether it is simply agnostic. Although agnosticism can be the first step on the way to skepticism it is important to distinguish between them. The agnostic simply affirms lack of knowledge, while implicitly or explicitly affirming that the demand for knowledge can, in principle at least, be satisfied. The skeptic, on the other hand, denies that the demand for knowledge can be satisfied. Put differently, the agnostic claims that the criteria for knowledge have not been satisfied, whereas the skeptic denies that the criteria *can* be met.

Complete skepticism is an extreme position that is self-refuting, combining, as it does, the reasonable assumption that for a claim to count as knowledge it must be justified by adequate evidence, with the unreasonable assumption that no available evidence is adequate to justify any knowledge claim whatever. Recognition of the skeptic's inconsistency in holding that (it is known) no knowledge is possible may have been one of the reasons skepticism failed to take hold, despite the considerable attention focused on epistemological issues. In the absence of any direct evidence in support of this position, however, we might look to a much more likely reason—the recognized limitations of rational and perceptual knowledge. As Keith points out, the natural desire of the philosopher is to know the Ātman, or inner Self which cannot be known by perceptual or rational modes of knowledge.²⁰ “Knowledge” of Ātman, however, is not ordinary knowledge, and ordinary means of knowledge are not adequate for its attainment. This is brought out clearly in Yājñavalkya's discussion with his wife, Maitreyī, about the transcendence of knowledge in complete Self-awareness.

When the individual ego is left behind in Self-realization, then there is no knowledge, Yājñavalkya announces. When Maitreyī says that she does not understand how there is no knowledge in Self-awareness, Yājñavalkya explains that knowledge consists in relations between subject and object, a duality that

is overcome in Self-realization. “Where, verily, everything has become the Self, then by what and whom should one smell, then by what and whom should one see . . . hear . . . speak . . . think . . . understand? By what should one know that by which all this is known? By what, my dear, should one know the knower?”²¹

Now, since it is the knowledge of Self that is important, and since this knowledge is not the knowledge of objects by a subject through perception, inference, etc., logical and epistemological worries about this kind of knowledge were not as important as cultivating the higher knowledge. It is this *ātmajñāna*—compared to which other kinds of knowledge are merely ignorance (*avidyā*)—that Yājñavalkya is going off into the woods to seek. This is not the place to go into an analysis of *ātmajñāna* and its relation to ordinary knowledge (and it would be a mistake to assume that they are totally unrelated), but I would like to conclude with the suggestion that the Indian emphasis on knowing the self as subject and a considerable reluctance to reduce it to object status has been instrumental in helping avoid the temptation of becoming preoccupied with the epistemological extreme of skepticism.

NOTES

1. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, *Source Book of Indian Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 228. My discussion of Jayarāśi is based on the excerpts from the *Tattvopaplavasīnha* contained in the *Source Book*, pp. 236–246, and those passages presented and discussed by K. N. Jayatilleke in *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963), pp. 79–92.
2. *Sarva-Darśana-Saṅgraha*, chap. 1. Trans. E. B. Cowell and A. E. Gough (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd.), p. 2.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4. Most likely it is the Cārvāka’s unacceptable denial of God, salvation and karma, rather than his epistemological analyses and arguments that provoked the very considerable abuse directed toward this school.
7. Surendranath Dasgupta, *History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 536, footnote 2.
8. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, p. 77.
9. *Nyāya Sūtra*, 1.1.4.
10. See Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 79–87.
11. *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads* (Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. 32. Reprinted by Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), pp. 432ff.
12. Griffith translation. *Source Book*, p. 34.
13. Thomas translation. *Source Book*, p. 35.
14. Edgerton translation. Franklin Edgerton, *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 61–63.
15. *Kāṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.1.20. In Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953), p. 603.
16. *Kāṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.1.21, p. 604.

17. Edgerton translation. *Beginnings*, p. 70. (With Edgerton, we reject the tenth verse as a later addition to the text.)

18. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

19. *History of Indian Epistemology*, 2d ed. (Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, 1958), pp. 26–28.

20. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.4.14. In *Principal Upaniṣads*, p. 201.