

CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE

OVERVIEW

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My book, *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, and Śrī Harṣa*, grew out of my work in graduate school, which in turn grew out of my long-time interests in philosophical skepticism. In the preface I explain that as a child I often felt that people around me didn't really know what they were talking about. Moving to the first year of my PhD program at the University of New Mexico, I felt that there was something wrong with me: whereas everyone around me seemed to have strong opinions about various philosophical matters, I often found myself without any such opinions. Yet I found intellectual kinship in the works of Jayarāsi, Sextus Empiricus, and Nāgārjuna (Śrī Harṣa would come later). I made friends with these ancient philosophers and these strange friendships have influenced my life – whether for good or for ill it's hard to say.

In the introduction, I state the thesis of the book: the classical Indian philosophical tradition contains a tradition of skepticism about philosophy represented most clearly by three figures: Nāgārjuna (c. 150-200 CE), Jayarāsi (c. 770-830 CE), and Śrī Harṣa (c. 1125-1180 CE); understanding this tradition ought to be an important part of our metaphilosophical reflections on the purposes and limits of philosophy today. Unlike varieties of epistemological skepticism familiar to philosophers today, which consist of doubts about knowledge in particular domains (the external world, induction, etc.), skepticism about philosophy is found most clearly in the Western tradition in Hellenistic Pyrrhonian skepticism, which consists of a therapy for those afflicted by the philosophical quest for dogmatic beliefs. My book is situated within a larger project that I call expanding the history of philosophy. Just as the history of Western philosophy informs and illuminates contemporary philosophy, so can expanding the history of philosophy to include classical India and other traditions serve to enhance philosophical pursuits today.

Chapter one serves as the prehistory of the three major figures discussed later. The thesis of chapter one is that the seeds of skepticism about philosophy can be

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found in the earliest strata of the Indian philosophical tradition: in the *Rg Veda*, in some *Upaniṣads*, and in some early Buddhist texts. This demonstrates that the type of skepticism that received sophisticated development in the classical tradition was a development of ideas found hundreds of years earlier. Nāgārjuna developed early Buddhist quietism, Jayarāśi developed the materialist and Sañjayan strains, and Śrī Harṣa developed *Upaniṣadic* mystical skepticism. This represents an alternative historiography of Indian philosophy: traditions can be distinguished by philosophical methods and psychological goals. This complicates but does not entirely replace the traditional school model based on explicitly articulated beliefs and religious praxis. I uncover a history of skepticism about philosophy in classical India by drawing together figures that are typically considered to be members of competing schools.

Chapters two and three cover Nāgārjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. The thesis of chapter two is that Nāgārjuna is best interpreted as a skeptic about philosophy and as the first of the three pillars of the classical Indian tradition of skepticism about philosophy (I borrow the image of the three pillars from Eli Franco). I show how my interpretation incorporates the best of the more plausible existing interpretations (mysticism, anti-realism, and epistemological skepticism), but without the weaknesses of these interpretations. Nāgārjuna's procedure operates in two phases: in phase one he argues in favor of a thesis of emptiness, but in phase two he demonstrates that emptiness purges Mādhyamikas of any view, thesis, or theory whatsoever, even views about emptiness itself. Nāgārjuna's skepticism fits with and bolsters his Buddhist credentials as a legitimate development of early Buddhist quietism, and my skeptical interpretation also has precedents within the Buddhist tradition in India, China, and Tibet.

The thesis of chapter three is that skepticism about philosophy can make sense of Nāgārjuna's arguments about epistemology and metaphysics. After a tour of Nāgārjuna's arguments about epistemology in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, I make a case study of Nāgārjuna's famous arguments on causal theories in *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* chapter one, which shows that skepticism about philosophy makes for a coherent interpretation of this chapter and its place in the text. I end with reflections on how Nāgārjuna combined two main trends of early Buddhist philosophy: analysis-insight and quietism.

Chapters four and five cover Jayarāśi, who I argue is both a skeptic and a member of the irreligious Cārvāka school. The thesis of chapter three is that Jayarāśi is best interpreted as a skeptic about philosophy and as the second of the three pillars. I begin by showing that the study of Cārvāka in general and Jayarāśi in particular can contribute to a richer understanding of the diversity of Indian thought. Next I present the basic thrust of Jayarāśi's *Tattvopaplavasīṃha* (*Lion of the Destruction of Principles*): the destruction of all philosophical principles, especially in epistemology. I find it helpful to compare Jayarāśi's outlook to contextualism in contemporary epistemology: in the context of epistemology, epistemology self-destructs; in the context of everyday life, there is no need for epistemology. Lastly, I consider how Jayarāśi can be seen as a Cārvāka. The delightful destruction of epistemology clears the ground for a form of life free from the burdens of philosophy and religion. Thus,

we have a uniquely irreligious strand within the classical Indian tradition of skepticism about philosophy.

Chapter five applies the general interpretive framework of the previous chapter to Jayarāṣi's arguments against the epistemological theories of the Buddhist philosophers Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. I conceptualize Jayarāṣi's critique in terms of what contemporary epistemologist Michael Williams calls "epistemological realism," or the idea that there are such things as structures of human knowledge about which epistemologists can theorize. I give a detailed analysis of two of Jayarāṣi's arguments: the Non-Establishment of Difference Argument, which tries to show that the Buddhists cannot maintain a difference between perception and inference, and the Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument, which shows that, if the Buddhist theory that there are two mutually incompatible means of knowledge were true, one could never establish that this theory is true. I end with reflections on how these arguments fit within Jayarāṣi's larger project of skepticism about philosophy.

Chapters six and seven cover Śrī Harṣa, who is usually considered to be part of the Brahmanical Advaita Vedānta school. The thesis of chapter six is that Śrī Harṣa should, like Nāgārjuna and Jayarāṣi, be read as a skeptic about philosophy and as the third pillar. After a treatment of his philosophical context, especially post-Śaṅkara Advaita Vedānta and the realism of the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā schools, I then discuss the major contemporary interpretations of Śrī Harṣa from scholars such as Granoff, Phillips, and Ram-Prasad, showing the strengths and weaknesses of each interpretation. The point of Śrī Harṣa's negative dialectic is to eliminate realism and to present the *possibility* of experience of non-dual *brahman*, but that unlike other contemporary scholars, I see this as a kind of skepticism about philosophy and part of the tradition that I have been exploring. In particular, Śrī Harṣa presents an incredibly sophisticated development of *Upaniṣadic* mystical skepticism.

The thesis of chapter seven is that applying the interpretation developed in the previous chapter to some of Śrī Harṣa's specific arguments in the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* makes good sense of both these specific arguments and of Śrī Harṣa's overall purpose. I begin with Śrī Harṣa's discussion of the role of the means of knowledge in a philosophical debate; he argues, contrary to his realist opponents, that participation in philosophical debate does not commit one to accepting the validity of the means of knowledge. I then look at Śrī Harṣa's devastating critique of the coherence of realist notions of existence (*sattā* and *tattva*). All of this not only demonstrates that Śrī Harṣa is skeptical about philosophy, but shows that he can remain non-dogmatically open to the *possibility* that there could be veridical non-dual experience without thereby providing any philosophical arguments *in favor of* such a view.

Having completed the main argument of the book, in the conclusion I consider what this type of skepticism might teach us today. Are the three pillars in some sense *right*? Is there any good that comes out of philosophical inquiry? Are recent philosophy naysayers like Stephen Hawking and Marco Rubio right that philosophy is a useless enterprise? I begin my answer by suggesting that skepticism about philosophy is a cross-cultural phenomenon with examples of Pyrrhonians in the West

and perhaps Zhuangzi in China and al-Ghazali in Islamic philosophy. The historical persistence of skepticism about philosophy raises deep questions about the limits of human capacities for philosophical inquiry as explored in recent work such as Susan Blackmore on memes, Noam Chomsky on mysterianism, and Graham Priest on the limits of thought.

Yet I argue in favor a mitigated form of skepticism about philosophy: while I agree with the three pillars that philosophy is unlikely to yield non-controversial answers anytime soon (as demonstrated via a millennia-long pessimistic induction), I argue that philosophy is valuable for at least three reasons. 1. It can be fun. 2. It develops cognitive capacities such as intellectual imagination, critical thinking skills, and intellectual empathy. 3. It can lessen dogmatism. I end with reflections on the importance of the history of philosophy and especially the necessity of expanding our histories to include multiple traditions. If we claim that the history of philosophy enriches our present-day understandings of ourselves and our interrogations of what it means to be human, then it is myopic madness to limit ourselves to the history of one geographical tradition.

Part of what I'm trying to do with this book is to offer interpretations that can make sense of these often puzzling texts, but I also want to challenge prevailing ideas about the study of the classical Indian tradition as well as philosophy more generally. This book may fail to convince many of its readers. But that's okay. It's enough, I think, to have encouraged people to reconsider assumptions about the three pillars, classical Indian philosophy, and philosophy more generally. Given the various crises assailing our discipline both within and without, I suspect some rethinking is on order. If my book serves to provoke a few thoughts and encourage some rethinking of assumptions, then I will consider it a success.