

## CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE

### REPLIES TO LAURA GUERRERO, RACHANNA KAMTEKAR, AND JENNIFER NAGEL

ETHAN A. MILLS

#### REPLY TO LAURA GUERRERO

Guerrero has done an excellent job summarizing my basic claims. I also greatly appreciate her careful historical clarifications of the term *svabhāva* in Nyāya and Abhidharma. She offers a valuable clarification of the anti-realist interpretation. And her work taking this interpretation into the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti school is fascinating. I look forward to seeing how she continues to pursue that in the future.

But, of course, I would be undermining the conventions of our current academic context if I merely praised her comments and didn't answer some of her substantive objections. Let me limit myself to three main points.

First, I am not sure that quite as much rests on my specific reading of anti-realism as self-undermining as Guerrero seems to think. While I do still think a theory of universal emptiness has issues (more on that point in a bit), the origin of my skeptical interpretation is really a larger problem with Nāgārjuna's texts, like the MMK and VV, insofar as they contain both "positive" claims about emptiness but also "negative" claims about the relinquishing of all views or theses (Mills 2018, 26-27).

The anti-realist way to resolve this tension has often involved square brackets, to say that Nāgārjuna meant "all [false] views" (MMK 27.30). But I took up my interpretive task to wonder if we might take another way. What if he actually meant *all* views? Not views of a certain kind or views implicitly involving *svabhāva*, but all views – full stop?

Of course, most Buddhist scholars block this move, as Guerrero does, by invoking things like a general sense that Buddhism must be about liberating knowledge, the presence of Right Views as part of the Eightfold Path, and so forth. Thus, no Buddhist could ever be a skeptic. I'll return to this later, but I will point out for now that these are further assumptions that are by no means beyond questioning.

My interpretation then is an experiment: What if we took Nāgārjuna at his word? Could we make sense of his seemingly-absurd claims of positionlessness? Could we do so while also making sense of this as a development of aspects of earlier Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions? What if we focus on what Nāgārjuna's arguments are

supposed to *do* to the reader's inner psychology as part of a Buddhist practice in a manner similar to Hellenistic Skepticism and Stoicism? As I saw it, few previous scholars had thoroughly explored these questions (although the 12<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan Buddhist philosopher Patsab Nyimadrak comes close).

I suppose my two-phase interpretation as I have written it does revolve around the contradiction as a means to move from phase one to phase two. Whether emptiness undermines itself or not, Nāgārjuna seems to be wondering what, if anything, philosophers would have left to say once they were thoroughly immersed in emptiness.

So, I could sum up this point with a parody of Nāgārjuna's enigmatic verse 29 of the *IV*: If my entire interpretation rested on a particular claim that the thesis of universal emptiness undermines itself, I would have a fault. But it does not, so therefore I have no fault.

My second point is about the deepest and most interesting part of Guerrero's comments: her reading of the emptiness of emptiness. Guerrero makes a helpful distinction between Ultimate<sub>1</sub> or "reality/truth as it is known by the wise" and Ultimate<sub>2</sub> or "A technical sense introduced by the Ābhidharmikas to indicate reality that is fundamental, i.e., real existence (*dravya*) that is determined by *svabhāva* and the truths regarding that reality" (Guerrero 2019, 95).

What follows is to my mind the best defense of the anti-realist interpretation I've seen yet. I've never denied that anti-realism is a *possible* interpretation of Nāgārjuna. I happen to think it's not the *best* interpretation, but it is better than many others (like irrationalism or empiricism).

Guerrero makes a number of other intriguing moves that I will pass over for now. She ends up putting all this together to claim that emptiness of emptiness means that "the nature of being empty is also not intrinsic" (Guerrero 2019, 98).

My question is: if emptiness is not intrinsic, then...so what? Why would it be important to point out at all, especially if it's supposed to be common sense? This is a lot of heavy philosophical theory for common sense. If philosophy becomes common sense what does philosophy have to say that common sense itself does not already say? Even the subtle reminders that Guerrero and others like Georges Dreyfus and Jay Garfield (2011) have suggested don't really leave much for philosophers to do. Or maybe there is *nothing* left for philosophy to do, but then that's just what my skeptical interpretation says.

Let me summarize this in a dilemma: If philosophy *does* add something to common sense, how can it avoid making ultimate claims (in whatever sense), which in turn leads to various problems? If philosophy *does not* add something to common sense, is philosophy completely superfluous? Either philosophy engenders the problems of ultimate truth, or it adds nothing to the pretheoretical understandings of common sense.

But, one might object that I have yet to address whether the thesis of universal emptiness is logically consistent. I am of the opinion that it is inconsistent, but I think Guerrero has corrected what may have been Garfield's mistake, a mistake I may have erroneously endorsed.

I still think global anti-realism of a more general sense is logically inconsistent, as I argue in a *prasaṅga* argument of my own at endnote 29, on page 47 of my book. Whether it is possible to avoid this inconsistency in the manner Guerrero proposes is something I will have to consider further.

But I still think there is *some* sense in which a thesis of universal emptiness undermines much, if not all, of what most of philosophers in both classical India and contemporary academia would think of as philosophy. Given the lack of intrinsic natures, how could one ever specify what emptiness actually is with anything like the rigor Guerrero proposes? If emptiness itself lacks a stable, definable characteristic, what happens to all that careful textual and linguistic work and all those precise philosophical distinctions that analytically-minded philosophers in classical India or contemporary North America love so much? This, I think, is Nāgārjuna's deeper question.

Nāgārjuna's immediate target is *svabhāva* or what Guerrero calls Ultimate<sub>2</sub>, but the ultimate target (pun intended) is something even deeper than that. Due to the especially dialectical nature of the classical Indian tradition in general and ancient skepticism about philosophy in particular, Nāgārjuna cannot simply come out and say something like "I reject every possible philosophical theory in all times and places."

Nāgārjuna certainly *has* a problem with the concept of *svabhāva*, but it's not his *only* problem. The deeper problem is the attachment to views that an idea like *svabhāva* seems to encourage. But one *could* become attached to any view, even emptiness itself. As *MMK* 13.8 says, "The antidote to all views is proclaimed by the conquerors to be emptiness. Those who have a view of emptiness the conquerors called incurable."<sup>1</sup>

So, I ask: Why *can't* Nāgārjuna's claim to have no views include views in the sense of Ultimate<sub>1</sub>, the truth according to the wise?

I'm reminded of a conversation I had with Mark Siderits a few years ago. After hearing a talk where I gave an overview of my skeptical interpretation, he said that he and I don't actually disagree, because anti-realism is not a theory. I left the conversation a bit unsure what he meant, but I think he meant that anti-realism is more of an *attitude* about philosophical activity. And maybe this attitude is what Nāgārjuna is explaining in *MMK* 27.29: "And thus, due to the emptiness of all beings, in regard to what, for whom, of what things at all, will views, concerning eternity and so forth, be possible?" Once you give up on finding Ultimate<sub>2</sub> or something like it, it's hard to see what would be left to say about Ultimate<sub>1</sub>. So, when Nāgārjuna says the purpose of the Buddha's teaching is the relinquishing of all views in *MMK* 27.30, I think he means that, whether a thesis of universal emptiness is logically inconsistent or not, after it does its work, one is left with nothing more to say.

I do, unfortunately, have more to say. My third and final point has to do with methodological issues.

A point on Early Buddhist quietism and the analysis-insight strand: Buddhism is a big, messy thing with lots of strands put to lots of uses. To make a bit of an anti-

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Sanskrit are my own unless otherwise noted.

realist point myself: there is no one thing that all Buddhists must think. My point is that Nāgārjuna had conceptual resources for both the analysis-insight and quietist strands and it is at least plausible that he combined them in a way that can make sense of his own puzzling texts.

Another quick point: there is also something odd about asserting that Buddhist philosophers could be propagating common sense when Buddhists have a long history of arguing for claims that are *anything but* common sense: suffering, non-self, momentariness, etc.

Also, I wholeheartedly admit Nāgārjuna's texts are therapy for intellectuals. There are other Buddhist therapies for other types of people. Normal people surely suffer, but it is primarily intellectuals who suffer the disease of having extensive theories about *svabhāva*.

Even given Guerrero's excellent defense of anti-realism, I still don't think it dissolves the tension between the positive and negative programs. And that's what I'm trying to do, although if Siderits is right, maybe we disagree less than I think.

My interpretation relies less on undermining anti-realism and more on how to better make sense of the text. One *could* do so as an anti-realist. Guerrero gives good insights on how to do that. But the text itself underdetermines all interpretations, including of course my own.

Whatever Nāgārjuna is doing, I doubt he's merely offering a technical philosophical theory. I often wonder whether Nāgārjuna would laugh at our attempts to make coherent philosophical sense of his texts. Is there some more subversive point all of us are missing in our attempts to get at a meaning compatible with contemporary academic philosophy? Are we meant, rather, to stop, to turn our gaze deeper into our own motivations, perhaps to a place where anti-realism and skepticism momentarily merge and then dissipate into something we still after 1,800 years lack the philosophical vocabulary to articulate?

I'm not sure. But I think these questions are part of why Nāgārjuna continues to fascinate so many philosophers today. And I am sincerely thankful to Guerrero for her fascinating defense of the anti-realist interpretation.

Yet Nāgārjuna is not the only philosopher that fascinates. (Perhaps one could even say he receives more than his fair share of fascination). So, I will move on.

#### REPLY TO RACHANNA KAMTEKAR

Turning next to Kamtekar's exemplary comments, it occurs to me that while writing a book that is somewhat inter-sub-disciplinary is fun, it also opens one up to criticisms from many different angles. For example, I venture into Hellenistic philosophy and work with my own interpretation of Sextus Empiricus. Kamtekar rightly notes that my interpretation is hardly non-controversial.

My impression is that there is no more a standard view of Sextus than there is a standard view of Nāgārjuna, but I admit that I am much more of an outsider when it comes to Sextus: whereas I have a pretty good idea when things I say about Nāgārjuna are going to seem *outré* to most of my colleagues, I am far less confident

about how my understanding of Sextus appears to scholars of ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. I am thankful to Kamtekar's insider's perspective for steering me toward some clues on this matter.

One point about Sextus about which I have said too little is the long-standing scholarly dispute about whether Sextus has no beliefs or some beliefs. Let me come clean and say that I lean heavily toward the "no belief" or "rustic" interpretation; I am aware this is controversial, but as a bit of an outsider I'm not sure exactly how controversial it is.

Kamtekar makes the point that my distinction between Sextus's target being belief rather than knowledge is a matter of "nomenclature, not substance" (Kamtekar 2019, 102). I think it is more substantial, because Sextus only focuses on knowledge insofar as it involves belief, whereas modern skeptics worry first about knowledge and only incidentally about belief. Again, the some belief versus no belief debate is here. Also, I don't agree that "Pyrrhonian skepticism may turn out to be a theoretical position after all" (Kamtekar 2019, 102).

Let me focus quickly on Kamtekar's two main points. First, on positionlessness, I think our deeper disagreement has to do with the coherence of the no belief interpretation. Kamtekar says, "Insofar as the practice of skepticism involves making claims..." (Kamtekar 2019, 104). Yet that Sextus is making claims is precisely what scholars like Thorsrud and I are denying.

On being a Buddhist skeptic, my point is that Buddhism as a religious identity or a religious practice need not be focused on explicitly articulated belief. The "sayings" could be part of the practice, which is what I take Sextus's point to be. Buddhism already has concepts such as *neyārtha*, conventional truth, and skillful means, which may make sense of what's going on here.

Kamtekar's point on *prasaṅga* versus *pariyudāsa* negations and entailments versus presuppositions is fascinating. I will have to give this further consideration. My hunch is the Sextan route is the way to go. In fact, I do argue that Jayarāsi is reporting how things seem to him in a rather Sextan manner as descriptive rather than normative (Mills 2018, 90-91).

Is Kamtekar right (along with Burnyeat) that Sextus unwittingly has secret beliefs? I don't think so, but again this pushes us into the territory of a centuries-long interpretive dispute about Sextus, which I can't hope to resolve in this response. I will note, however, that much of this dispute involves trying to understand a Pyrrhonian mindset from the outside. Once skeptical therapy has done its job, the mindset of a Pyrrhonian skeptic may be quite different than we dogmatists can understand. As R. J. Hankinson notes, there is a mistake that "views the Sceptic's mental life from the standpoint of the Dogmatist, and assumes that, even after the Sceptical medicine has taken its effect, the structure of the Sceptic's assents and dissents will remain largely the same as before" (Hankinson 1995, 286).

Kamtekar's other main point on cessation of conceptualization versus suspension of judgment is interesting and worth further inquiry. When I say that Sextus's target is philosophy, I mean that he is generally focused on things philosophers and other self-styled experts say. Maybe he thinks farmers and merchants have their own kinds

of dogmatism, but he is not much concerned to engage with them. Just as Nāgārjuna's targets are mainly Naiyāyikas and Ābhīdharmikas, so are Sextus's mainly Stoics, Epicureans, Peripatetics, and Platonists. But for both of them the deeper target is something else: dogmatism for Sextus and attachment to views for Nāgārjuna.

I admit I may be foisting more unity on *these* targets than is warranted, but my point has only ever been comparative. The category of "skepticism about philosophy" is, to use a Buddhist term, a conceptual construction, but one that I think has its uses. I am not making any claim so rash as to say that Sextus and Nāgārjuna are saying the *same* thing. But their targeted mental states are to my mind quite similar, which of course if hypotheses about historical contact between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism have any truth to them at all would be unsurprising.

In the future I hope to work on a Nāgārjunian/Jayarāśian/Śrī Harṣian reading of Sextus. In particular, I wonder if the three pillars could help scholars understand what Sextus thinks is wrong with dogmatism in the first place. This may in turn create a new position on the old debate about whether Sextus has some or no beliefs: maybe the problem with beliefs is that we are attached to them, and Pyrrhonism is a family of therapies designed to cultivate the knack of purging oneself of the desire or tendency to create such sources of attachment. I leave to my future self the question of whether a skeptic could *possess* beliefs without being attached to them. In any case, Kamtekar's comments here will greatly help my future self should such a project come to fruition.

#### REPLY TO JENNIFER NAGEL

Turning to Nagel's insightful comments, I'm first of all glad that she recognized the fun of all this and that she was convinced about at least some things. I don't expect this book to convince many readers, so when it even partly convinces someone I see this as an unexpected bonus.

I will have a bit to say about several of Nagel's points, but I particularly appreciate the framing of things as being anti-philosophical versus being a philosophical reformer (Nagel 2019, 112).

I'm attracted to semantic contextualism in epistemology because of its way of making sense of both external-world skepticism and regular life in non-philosophical contexts. I thought something like this might be the key to understanding how Jayarāśi can so vociferously critique the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) while also claiming to follow a worldly way of life, one that I argue is entirely compatible with the irreligious Cārvāka school.

I am especially grateful to Nagel's comments on contextualism as she is a great deal more familiar with the literature in this area than I am. I also found it interesting that she engaged with my brief comments on shallow-deep knowledge in the conclusion (Mills 2018, 174-175), which I would at best refer to as an impressionistic proto-theory. And she has a great point on how I may not differ from Cohen as much

as I think (Nagel 2019, 112-113). I'd like to thank Nagel for these clarifications in terms of my uses (and hopefully not abuses) of contemporary contextualism.

Nagel makes an interesting point on what contextualists think is the role of epistemology *vis-à-vis* ordinary epistemic talk. Going back to Guerrero's and other anti-realist, conventionalist interpretations of Nāgārjuna, though, I wonder what such additional theory is actually adding. It seems to me that the more contextualism "is motivated by a desire to save and explain the empirical data of ordinary talk involving 'know(s)' and its cognates", the less one would have to say about contextualism over and above what is already included in those everyday contexts.

And what is the context of contextualism itself? In an endnote, I cite an excellent article by Elke Brendel, who argues that "there is no context in which the contextualist can claim to know that her theory is true" (Brendel 2005, 38; Mills 2018, 97 n. 34). Brendel's argument is complex and involves a great deal of epistemic logic, but for my present purposes it suffices to say that Brendel exploits the sort of self-referential argument that Jayarāśi loves. As Nagel notes, I am not of course claiming that Jayarāśi explicitly supports contextualism, partly because I think he would apply similar reasoning to contextualism as he applies in the *Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument* against Dignāga and Dharmakīrti.

Let's turn next to Śrī Harṣa. Nagel's take on Śrī Harṣa is similar to Jonardon Ganeri's. But Ganeri's point is that this new way of doing philosophy is one of two possibilities. He says that Śrī Harṣa "leaves us somewhat uncertain whether we should be searching for a new way to do philosophy, a way that doesn't require us to participate in ungrounded intellectual activities, or whether we are meant to abandon philosophy altogether and adopt quieter, less aggressive, ways of approaching truth" (Ganeri 2016, 16).

I think the overwhelmingly negative thrust of the text gives some evidence in favor of the second hypothesis, although of course the first cannot be ruled out. There remains a lot more to consider when it comes to Śrī Harṣa, who I have come to see as one of the most original and fascinating philosophers in his or any philosophical tradition. I hope others will line up to sample from Śrī Harṣa's *Buffet of Destruction*. There are, I suspect, great feasts of philosophical delight to be found in this woefully understudied masterpiece of philosophy.

Those wanting to explore what new modes of philosophical activity Śrī Harṣa could be exploring in the first hypothesis, however, would do well to start with Nagel's conjecture that Śrī Harṣa's point may be, somewhat like Timothy Williamson's "knowledge-first" epistemology, that "there is some primitive and unanalyzable (or undefinable) phenomenon of knowledge itself".

When it comes to Śrī Harṣa's ultimate aims, he is hoping readers will be at least open to non-dual experience. When I say that this experience itself cannot be the conclusion of a philosophical argument, I have in mind the inherently paradoxical nature of claiming to say anything about non-dualism (Mills 2018, 129-130), but also the fact that as enthusiastic as Śrī Harṣa may be about exhorting his readers to try it for themselves, he never *argues in favor* of non-dualism as a philosophical thesis.

This is part of what I mean by *Upaniṣadic* mystical skepticism, which to be sure Śrī Harṣa develops to a far more sophisticated degree than it appears in the *Upaniṣads* themselves. In a forthcoming paper (Mills 2019) I argue that the mystical possibility can itself be taken as a kind of skeptical scenario meant to make readers less certain about their own everyday conception of reality—reality may be, for all we know, quite different than we take it to be. I think this is *some* kind of skepticism, but as Nagel notes, it is not exactly captured in its Western ancient or modern analogues.

On the meaning of “philosophy”, this has in fact been one of the biggest criticisms I have faced. How can I define something called “skepticism about philosophy” without specifying what, exactly, these skeptics mean by “philosophy”? I often remain resolute and say that for these skeptics it is purely dialectical. They can’t, on pain of contradiction, give their own definition of philosophy; they merely criticize what their opponents say about the matter. For my part as an interpreter who claims only to be a mitigated skeptic about philosophy, I come dangerously close to defining philosophy as something like Wilfrid Sellars’s vague definition involving an inquiry into how things hang together (Mills 2018, xxxiv-xxxv n. 16) or the pursuit of what I enigmatically refer to as “deep knowledge” (Mills 2018, 174-175).

As admittedly vague and impressionistic as all this is, it’s perhaps hard for me to give a concrete answer to Nagel’s dichotomy of rejecting versus reforming philosophy. But just as one can disagree with one’s friends, I am by no means bound to the attitude of the three pillars themselves despite the intellectual camaraderie I feel with them. As a mitigated skeptic about philosophy—and of course a philosophy professor myself—I do feel that there is *some* room for something called philosophy and that asking philosophical questions is a natural thing for people to do, but I think the three pillars encourage us to think carefully and deeply about what both reformed and unreformed philosophical activities can and can’t do for us today.

I thank Nagel for her excellent comments that will help to continue these conversations.

In conclusion, I’d like to once again thank each of the participants. I will now take Jayarāṣi’s advice and stop so readers can enjoy other things.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to thank Anand Vaidya for organizing this symposium. I am extremely honored and humbled to have my book discussed in the “Constructive-Engagement Dialogue” section in the current issue of *Comparative Philosophy*. I’d also like to thank each of the other participants: Laura Guererro, Jennifer Nagel, and Rachana Kamtekar. I am deeply thankful to each of them for having such insightful things to say about my book. I hope to have begun repaying their kindness by offering some responses that will keep the conversation going.



## REFERENCES

- Brendel, Elke (2005), “Why Contextualists Cannot Know They Are Right: Self-Refuting Implications of Contextualism”, *Acta Analytica* 20.2: 38-55.
- Dreyfus, Georges and Jay L. Garfield (2011), “Madhyamaka and Classical Greek Skepticism”, in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 115-130.
- Ganeri, Jonardon (2016), “Śrīharṣa’s Dissident Epistemology: Of Knowledge as Assurance”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, edited by Jonardon Ganeri (Oxford Handbooks Online [www.oxfordhandbooks.com](http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com)). DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199314621.013.49
- Guerrero, Laura (2019), “Don’t Stop Believing: An Argument Against Buddhist Skepticism”, see the current issue of *Comparative Philosophy*, 88-99.
- Hankinson, R. J. (1995), *The Sceptics* (New York: Routledge).
- Kamtekar, Rachana (2019), “The Presuppositions of a Skeptic”, see the current issue of *Comparative Philosophy*, 100-110.
- Mills, Ethan (2018), *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, and Śrī Harṣa* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books).
- (2019, forthcoming), “Mystical Experience as a Skeptical Scenario: Śrīharṣa’s Skeptical Advaita”, in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Vedānta*, edited by Ayon Maharaj (London: Bloomsbury).
- Nagel, Jennifer (2019), “Classical Indian Skepticism: Reforming or Rejecting Philosophy”, see the current issue of *Comparative Philosophy*, 111-117.