

NĀGĀRJUNA'S PAÑCAKOṬI, AGRIPPA'S TRILEMMA AND THE USES OF SKEPTICISM

ETHAN A. MILLS

ABSTRACT: *While the contemporary problem of the criterion raises similar epistemological issues as Agrippa's Trilemma in ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism, the consideration of such epistemological questions has served two different purposes. On one hand, there is the purely practical purpose of Pyrrhonism, in which such questions are a means to reach suspension of judgment, and on the other hand, there is the theoretical purpose of contemporary epistemologists, in which these issues raise theoretical problems that drive the search for theoretical resolution. In classical India, similar issues arise in Nāgārjuna's Vīgrahavyāvartanī, but it is not entirely clear what Nāgārjuna's purpose is. Contrary to the theoretical interpretations of several recent scholars such as Jan Westerhoff according to which Nāgārjuna is proffering a contextualist epistemological theory, I argue that Nāgārjuna as well as the later Madhyamika Candrakīrti, much like Pyrrhonian skeptics, employed concerns about epistemic criteria in service of purely practical purposes. There is no positive epistemological theory to be found in Nāgārjuna's Vīgrahavyāvartanī and Candrakīrti's Prasannapadā; furthermore a putative thesis of universal emptiness is self-undermining, a conclusion which itself can be seen as part of a therapeutic program. Nonetheless, the historical persistence of these epistemological issues shows that they ought to continue to be areas of theoretical inquiry for epistemologists today. I end with reflections on the wider relevance of my conclusions, particularly with regard to demonstrating the value of philosophy.*

Keywords: *Nāgārjuna, Vīgrahavyāvartanī, Agrippa's Trilemma, problem of the criterion, skepticism, Candrakīrti*

How do we know what we think we know? Do we first understand *how* we know and then decide *what* we know? Or do we understand *what it is* that we know and come to understand *how* we know from there? In contemporary epistemology, such concerns often occur under the label of "the problem of the criterion." Similar concerns can be found in what, following ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics, has been called Agrippa's Trilemma or Agrippa's Five Modes. The consideration of such questions

MILLS, ETHAN A.: Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA. Email: ethan-mills@utc.edu

has served two different sorts of purposes. First, there is the purely practical purpose of Pyrrhonism, in which such questions are a means to reach a state of mind called suspension of judgment (*epochē*), which represents an end – at least temporarily – to epistemological theorizing. Second, there is the theoretical purpose of contemporary epistemologists, in which these issues raise theoretical problems that form an entry into further epistemological theorizing.

In classical India, similar issues arise in the work of Nāgārjuna, the second-century founder of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophy. While it is clear that ancient Pyrrhonists employed such concerns in line with practical concerns and that contemporary epistemologists do so theoretically, it is not entirely clear what Nāgārjuna's purpose is. Contrary to the theoretical interpretations of several recent scholars such as Jan Westerhoff, according to which Nāgārjuna accepts a contextualist epistemological theory, I will argue that Nāgārjuna as well as the later Madhyamaka Candrakīrti, much like Pyrrhonian skeptics, employed concerns about epistemic criteria in service of purely practical purposes. I will claim that there is no positive epistemological theory to be found in Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*; furthermore a putative thesis of universal emptiness is self-undermining, a conclusion which itself can be seen as part of a therapeutic program of relinquishing all views. Nonetheless, the historical persistence of these epistemological issues shows that they ought to continue to be areas of theoretical inquiry for epistemologists today. I end with reflections on the wider relevance of my conclusions concerning the practical uses of skepticism, particularly with regard to demonstrating the value of philosophy.

1. NĀGĀRJUNA'S PAÑCAKOṬI

Nāgārjuna's explicit critique of epistemology occurs in his text, *Overturing the Objections* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*, hereafter VV). In verses 31-51 Nāgārjuna responds to objections from the Nyāya school, which was known for its commonsense realism. An imagined Nyāya interlocutor objects that if the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) are empty of essence, they cannot perform their function of bringing about knowledge; thus Nāgārjuna cannot give any good reason to believe his assertion that all things lack essences (VV 5-6).¹ I will answer two questions about verses 31-51. First, what is the argument? And second, what is the purpose of this argument? In understanding the argument, let us start with the conclusion. According to the concluding verse of this section, there are five possible options for establishing the *pramāṇas* (means of knowledge), none of which can be established: "The *pramāṇas* are not established from themselves, nor from one another, nor by other kinds of *pramāṇas*, nor by the *prameyas* (objects of knowledge), nor even without any reason

¹ For more discussion of this objection, see Siderits 1980, 308-309 and Westerhoff 2010, 66-68. For details on the textual history and authenticity of the VV, see Westerhoff 2010, 4-9.

at all” (VV 51).² Rather than the Buddhist four-cornered negation, or *catuṣkoṭi*, perhaps we can call this a *five*-cornered negation, or “*pañcakoti*.”

The argument of the preceding verses is intended to support this conclusion and takes the form of an appeal to unwanted consequences (*prasaṅga*) wherein five possible options are considered and each one is systematically rejected. Here are the options:

Option One: The *pramāṇas* are established by other *pramāṇas* (verse 31). But this leads to an infinite regress (verse 32).

Option Two: Perhaps the *pramāṇas* are not established by other *pramāṇas* (verse 33), but they are self-established, just as fire illuminates both itself and other things (verse 34). But fire does *not* illuminate itself (verses 34-39).³ Also, if the *pramāṇas* are self-established, they would be unrelated to the *prameyas* (objects of knowledge) (verses 40-41), which leads to the next option...

Option Three: Perhaps *pramāṇas* are established by *prameyas* (verse 42). But then there’s no point in having a *pramāṇa* (verse 44), the proper order is reversed (verse 45), and circularity ensues (verses 46-48), which is as if a son is produced by a father and the father by the son (verses 49-50). Nāgārjuna reports that because of this circularity, “we are in doubt” (verse 50).⁴

Option Four: Perhaps the *pramāṇas* are mutually established either by *pramāṇas* of the same kind or other kinds (this option is not contained in its own verse, but it is presented in the commentary to verse 51). Nāgārjuna leaves it to the reader to see that this either leads to an infinite regress (as in option one) or circularity (as in option three).

Option Five: Perhaps the *pramāṇas* are established without any reason at all (this option is also in the commentary to verse 51). Nāgārjuna leaves it to the reader to see that this option is unsatisfactory for any would-be epistemologists, because it gives no explanation at all for what makes a *pramāṇa* an effective means of knowledge.⁵

Thus, Nāgārjuna’s argument aims to demonstrate that there are five possible options for Naiyāyikas to establish the *pramāṇas*, none of which are successful.

² *naiva svataḥ prasiddhir na parasparataḥ parapramāṇair vā/ na bhavati na ca prameyair na cāpy akasmāt pramāṇānām//* (VV 51). All translations from Sanskrit are my own unless otherwise noted.

³ For elucidations of the arguments in verses 34-39, see Siderits 1980, 313-314, Matilal 1986, Ch. 2, and Westerhoff 2010, 74-80.

⁴ *yato bhavati no ‘tra saṁdehaḥ//* (VV 51d).

⁵ For a more detailed and slightly different characterization of the argument, see Siderits 1980, 310-320. While Siderits sees the same five options I do, he categorizes them slightly differently into attempts at intrinsic and extrinsic proofs of the *pramāṇas*.

2. AFFINITIES WITH AGRIPPA'S TRILEMMA AND THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION

This argument has affinities with a cluster of topics in Western epistemology: Agrippa's Trilemma, Agrippa's Five Modes, and the problem of the criterion. The basic question involved is: how do we know the truth about something? According to Sextus Empiricus (c. 200 CE) in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (hereafter, PH), Agrippa's Trilemma allows three possible answers:

Option One (Mode of Hypothesis): We can make a brute assumption and refuse to keep justifying.

Option Two (Mode of Circularity): We can appeal to a criterion and then use the object under consideration to support the criterion in a circle.

Option Three (Mode of Infinite Regress): We can keep appealing to some additional criterion, which leads to an infinite regress.

In the Five Modes version, the three horns of Agrippa's Trilemma are called the Modes of Hypothesis, Circularity, and Infinite Regress. This version adds the Modes deriving from Dispute and Relativity (PH 1.15); since Sextus sees these latter two modes as methods for driving epistemological inquirers into the original Trilemma, I will not focus on the Modes of Dispute and Relativity here.⁶

Nāgārjuna's Option One is almost identical to the Mode of Infinite Regress. Options Two and Five are like the Mode of Hypothesis in that they both seek to halt the looming regress, although Option Two does so by positing self-establishing *pramāṇas* while Option Five does so by effectively opting out of the whole activity of establishing the *pramāṇas*. Nāgārjuna's Option Three is like the Mode of Circularity in verses 46-50, although it also includes the idea that if one had grasped the object (*prameya*) already the means of knowledge would be unnecessary (verse 44) as well as the idea of the proper order based on the grammatical notion that a *pramāṇa* is an instrument or means of knowing an object, a *prameya* (verse 45). Nāgārjuna's Option Four is a combination of Circularity and Infinite Regress.

For Pyrrhonians, the Five Modes were meant to lead skeptics to achieve suspension of judgment (*epochē*), which in turn leads to tranquility (*ataraxia*). According to Sextus,

⁶ See PH 1.170-177. As Michael Williams says, the Modes of Dispute and Relativity "can be seen as devices for maneuvering us into a position where we are confronted by the fatal trilemma [i.e., Agrippa's Trilemma]" (Williams 1996, 60). The Mode of Dispute focuses on the difficulty of knowing answers to philosophical questions given disagreements among philosophers. The Mode of Relativity focuses on the difficulty of knowing the truth given the differences of sensory experiences of various subjects in varying conditions. Given these challenges, would-be philosophers might seek to find a criterion by which to adjudicate which of these disparate views and experiences reveals the truth; hence, Agrippa's Trilemma awaits.

Scepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability, by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed object and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgement and afterwards to tranquillity. (PH 1.8)

Sextus defines these terms as follows.

By ‘equipollence’ we mean equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing: none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing. Suspension of judgement is a standstill of the intellect, owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything. Tranquillity is freedom from disturbance and calmness of soul. (PH 1.10)

Michael Williams (1988) argues that the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus is entirely practical in that it represents an ability rather than a theoretical position about or within epistemology. Even when Sextus uses the modes to present what appear to be epistemological conclusions about our inability to justify knowledge claims, he is using the modes as a way to suspend judgment. Sextus’s Pyrrhonism is not another epistemological theory: “instead of resting on epistemological commitments, it extends *epochē* into epistemology itself” (Williams 1988, 586). There are details of Williams’s account that remain controversial, such as whether Sextus is merely describing an ability as Williams argues or whether he is presenting epistemically normative reasons in favor of Pyrrhonism. In what follows I will assume a purely descriptive, practical interpretation of Pyrrhonism with the caveat that whatever normative elements there may be are perhaps indirect and not explicitly stated within the text of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (PH).⁷ Furthermore, whatever position one takes on the details of Sextus interpretation, it is less controversial to note that, as a Hellenistic philosopher, Sextus would have taken his philosophical activities to have practical elements in line with a conception of philosophy as a way of life in the sense described by Pierre Hadot (1995) and as a therapy for life’s ills within the type of medical model of philosophy described by Martha Nussbaum (1994).

For contemporary epistemologists⁸, similar considerations constitute a theoretical problem called the problem of the criterion. According to Roderick Chisholm, the problem consists of a pair of questions: “What is the *extent* of our knowledge?” and “What are the *criteria* for knowing?” (Chisholm 1977, 120; see also Chisholm 1973, 12). While it might seem you need to answer the first question about the extent of knowledge to answer the second about the criteria, it would also seem that you need

⁷ Thorsrud (2009, Chs. 7-9) offers helpful overviews of the major interpretive debates about Sextus (e.g., whether he’s providing a descriptive/causal or normative account, whether he has any beliefs, whether Pyrrhonism is inconsistent, how a Pyrrhonian can act in the world, etc.). Burnyeat and Frede 1997 is a more in-depth collection on many of these issues, especially on whether Pyrrhonians have beliefs.

⁸ See Chisholm 1957, Ch. 3, Chisholm 1977, Ch. 7, Chisholm 1973, Fumerton 2008, Sankey 2010, and Cling 2014 for contemporary treatments of the problem of the criterion.

to answer the second in order to answer the first. Hence, a vicious circularity ensues akin to the Pyrrhonian Mode of Circularity or Nāgārjuna's Option Three unless one can successfully answer one of the questions without answering the other first. Chisholm elsewhere gives the idea a linguistic turn: “ ‘The problem of the criterion’ is that of describing certain of the conditions under which we may *apply* our epistemic vocabulary – and more particularly, that of describing certain of the conditions under which we may apply our locution ‘S has adequate evidence for *h*’ ” (Chisholm 1957, 33).⁹

There are two typical antiskeptical answers to the problem of the criterion: the “particularist” answer appeals to things we know (answering the first question above) and tries to derive a criterion from those specific cases of knowledge (much like starting with the *prameyas* and deriving the *pramāṇas* from them) and the “generalist/methodist” answer that seeks to provide a general criterion first (answering the second question above) and then a specific answer (like finding the *pramāṇas* first and then the *prameyas*).¹⁰

One might defend particularism by pointing to self-justifying beliefs, at which point one would confront the Mode of Hypothesis or Nāgārjuna's Options Two and Five. Adopting either particularism or methodism would seem to raise either circularity (as in the Mode of Circularity or Nāgārjuna's Option Three) or an infinite regress (as in the Mode of Infinite Regress and Nāgārjuna's Option One). It would lead to circularity if it were to seem that to know that particularism is true one would need a method and *vice versa*. It would lead to infinite regress if one were to say that one knows a particular piece of knowledge or method via another piece of knowledge or method, which is in turn known by another piece of knowledge or method, *ad infinitum*. In this way we see similar epistemological issues present in three different

⁹ According to Richard Fumerton, there are two versions of the problem of the criterion: that of “how to identify the *sources* of knowledge or justified belief” and that of “how to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of epistemic *concepts* like knowledge and justified belief” (Fumerton 2008, 34). Chisholm 1977 discusses the first sense while Chisholm 1957 discusses the second. The concern with *pramāṇas* in classical Indian epistemology is more in line with the first sense of identifying the sources of knowledge.

¹⁰ For more on this distinction, see Fumerton 2008, Chisholm 1973, and Kornblith 2003, 593-5. Fumerton claims that skeptics (at least of a Humean variety) are generalists because they develop a criterion and “let the chips fall where they may when it comes to implications concerning what we do and do not know or are justified in believing” (Fumerton 2008, 42); Chisholm (1973) puts Hume, along with Locke, in the methodist/generalist camp and Reid in the particularist camp. While many internalists such as Chisholm have been particularists that start with common-sense considerations about particular beliefs we take to constitute knowledge (e.g., Chisholm 1973), Fumerton argues that such internalists *should* be generalists, since they must endorse the *a priori* knowability of basic principles of inference in order to countenance their access internalism (Fumerton 2008, 44). Epistemic externalists (at least of a reliabilist variety) are, according to Fumerton, strictly neither particularists nor generalists, because “a conclusion about the epistemic status of belief is *equivalent in meaning* to a conclusion about the belief's having the right sort of cause...” (Fumerton 2008, 48). Kornblith (2003) discusses the continuing legacy of Chisholm's epistemology; on the problem of the criterion, Kornblith (2003, 593-5) focuses on Chisholm's endorsement of particularism as the best of the three possible options, the others being methodism and skepticism.

traditions: Hellenistic philosophy, classical Indian philosophy, and contemporary analytic epistemology.

3. NĀGĀRJUNA'S PURPOSE

Let us turn now to my second question about VV 31-51: what is the purpose of Nāgārjuna's argument? Jan Westerhoff takes the purpose to be that of arguing for a positive epistemological theory: "an epistemological theory that incorporates empty epistemic instruments" (Westerhoff 2010, 69), one that rejects foundationalism in favor of contextualism (Westerhoff 2010, 82). According to Westerhoff, Nāgārjuna accepts an epistemology in which *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* are mutually established. I reconstruct Westerhoff's argument as follows (Westerhoff 2010, 86-87):

- (1) We start with a coherence theory of justification, in which the interplay between initially unjustified assumptions and coherence relations between beliefs constitutes our epistemic practice.
 - (2) But neither unjustified assumptions nor coherence relations "provides the kind of foundation the realist requires."
 - (3) Then, "We can never be certain whether our epistemic instruments are true to the nature of the objects they provide us with information about."
 - (4) Hence, "The whole notion of a reliable epistemic instrument ceases to make sense and the distinction between ontology and epistemology that the critic of the thesis of universal emptiness has to defend seems to vanish."
- C: Therefore, universal emptiness (i.e., the thesis that all things lack essences) is true.

Westerhoff sees VV 48 as a hypothesis of a coherence theory of justification: the exclusive source of justification is the contextually bound, dependently originated interplay between assumptions that are initially unjustified and the coherence of a body of beliefs. One puts forward an unjustified assumption, tests it against one's web of belief, adjusts the belief and/or the web accordingly, etc. There is no room for a realist correspondence between our beliefs and mind-independent reality, and the very notion of "mind-independent reality" allegedly ceases to be coherent (along the lines of the anti-realism in Siderits 2000). For anti-realist interpreters such as Westerhoff and Siderits, the thesis of universal emptiness *just is* a thesis of universal anti-realism.

While I am not myself persuaded by this argument¹¹, my concern here is not whether it is a good argument, but whether it is *Nāgārjuna's* argument. I have four

¹¹ As it stands, the argument gives no reason to accept a coherentist theory of justification. At best it tells us that *if* we accept coherentism, then we should be anti-realists. But I do not think it does that either, because it is not clear that the *concept* of correspondence to mind-independent reality could not be a coherent and even *useful* concept as coherentists strive for maximal coherence. Realism might be nothing more than a regulative ideal, but the anti-realist contention that realism is incoherent does not follow from the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to *know* whether our beliefs correspond to a

criticisms of attributing this argument to Nāgārjuna. First, Nāgārjuna never *says* any of this and never straightforwardly puts forward any sort of coherentist, contextualist, or anti-realist epistemology. He may have such a theory, but Westerhoff reads deep between the lines to find it.¹² Second, I do not think we need to attribute any such theory to Nāgārjuna in order to make sense of the text; in fact the text makes more sense if we do not do so. Third, the arguments in this section are *prasaṅga* arguments that appeal to unwanted consequences *for the opponent*. It's not clear why Westerhoff thinks there is a positive conclusion there.¹³ Fourth, I claim that the thesis of universal emptiness cannot be established epistemically. This fourth criticism is a controversial point, and I will return to it later.

In opposition to Westerhoff, I agree with Matilal's characterization:

What he [i.e., Nāgārjuna] called in question was the very concept of *pramāṇa*, our standards of proof, our evidence for knowledge. He did not use what is generally called an argument from illusion, nor did he appeal to the fallibility of our cognitive process. He did not argue on the basis of the fact that we do misperceive on many occasions, or that we make false judgments more often than not. Instead he developed a very strong and devastating critique of the whole epistemological enterprise itself and therefore his arguments have lasting philosophic value. (Matilal 1986, 49)

As Matilal points out, Nāgārjuna's skeptical move here is not a type of epistemological skepticism that calls into question specific types of knowledge-claims, it is rather skepticism about epistemology itself. Although Chisholm is less explicit about the metaepistemological implications of the problem of the criterion, his description of the issue applies almost perfectly to Nāgārjuna's argument:

But the appeal to such 'sources' leaves us with a kind of puzzlement. If the question 'How are we to decide, in any particular case, whether we know?' is seriously intended, then the following reply will hardly suffice: 'An ostensible item of knowledge is genuine if, and only if, it is the product of a properly accredited source of knowledge.' For such a reply naturally leads to further questions: 'How are we to decide whether an ostensible source of knowledge *is* properly accredited?' and 'How are we to decide just *what* it is that is yielded by a properly accredited source of knowledge?' (Chisholm 1977, 123)

mind-independent reality. While it may be the case that we cannot *know* whether our coherent web of beliefs corresponds to the world, the question of whether this web actually does correspond is still meaningful.

¹² Someone might object that the details of my skeptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna, which I will discuss below, are not present in the text either. Therefore, my interpretation fares no better than Westerhoff's in attributing to Nāgārjuna things he never explicitly says. In response I would claim that any interpretation of an author as difficult as Nāgārjuna requires some additional philosophical apparatus. My interpretation has the parsimonious benefit of adding a less cumbersome apparatus. Both Westerhoff and I have to read between the lines, but I do so a little less deeply in a way that is able to take more of Nāgārjuna's statements at face value.

¹³ I am especially puzzled by his reading of the father-son analogy (verses 49-50) as a *positive* endorsement of a mutual dependence of *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* (Westerhoff 2010, 88-90), since that would seem to be ruled out by Nāgārjuna's rejection of Option Three.

It is striking that considerations similar to Nāgārjuna's have also arisen in both Hellenistic and contemporary philosophy; that such considerations are problems for any sort of epistemological project in general gives us some indication of what Nāgārjuna's intentions may be. While the overall point of the VV seems to be establishing emptiness by "overturning objections" to emptiness, some sections of the text (verses 29 and 31-51) offer hints of what his *magnum opus*, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, calls the "relinquishment of all views" (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 27.30). The attack on epistemology in VV 31-51 is nominally an attack on Nyāya epistemology, but it provides a pattern (like the problem of the criterion or Agrippa's Trilemma) that can be applied to any epistemological theory. Since it is epistemology itself that is the target here, it is unlikely to be the case that Nāgārjuna himself is putting forward some alternative epistemological theory as Westerhoff claims.

I am not the first person to argue that Nāgārjuna can be read fruitfully in conjunction with philosophical skepticism. Some scholars have argued that there are direct historical connections between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, often focusing on Pyrrho's trip to South Asia as part of Alexander's entourage (e.g., Flintoff 1980, McEvilley 2002, Kuzminski 2008, Beckwith 2015, etc.). Although the prospect of such ancient cross-cultural philosophy is of considerable historical interest, I shall not evaluate such historical hypotheses here. My concern in this paper is with the content of Nāgārjuna's philosophical practice rather than its historical pedigree. I shall therefore suspend judgment on the question of historical interaction between Greek skeptics and Indian Buddhists.

My interpretation of Nāgārjuna is unique in so far as I do not see him as making any truth claims, either directly in the form of some theory like anti-realism or indirectly under the guise of mystical experience. Unlike Matilal, I do not see any reason to think that Nāgārjuna's skeptical arguments are meant to result in some sort of mystical apprehension (Matilal 1986, 46-68; Matilal 2002, 72-83). Jay Garfield (2002, Ch. 1) offers a sort of skeptical interpretation, but he does not clearly distinguish skepticism and anti-realism. Garfield and Georges Dreyfus (Dreyfus and Garfield 2011) come closer to my view in so far as they at least consider the idea that Nāgārjuna may be making no truth claims. Adrian Kuzminski (2008) draws a very close comparison between Nāgārjuna and the Pyrrhonian skepticism of Sextus Empiricus, but I do think there are differences, especially in methods, between Nāgārjuna and Sextus.¹⁴ David Burton develops a skeptical interpretation closer to mine, but then he dismisses it as inconsistent with what he takes to be Nāgārjuna's various truth-claims about emptiness (Burton 1999, Ch. 2).

Several recent scholars have joined Burton in noting that one way to distinguish between different kinds of skeptical interpretations of Nāgārjuna is whether the interpreter thinks that Nāgārjuna is the end of the day making truth-claims (Arnold

¹⁴ Sextus's method is meant to induce a suspension of judgment (*epochē*) on account of two claims being equal in convincingness and unconvincingness, whereas Nāgārjuna's *prasaṅga* method seeks to show that all possible options are unconvincing given the opponent's own views.

2005, 134; Dreyfus 2011, 92). Dreyfus puts the question clearly: “Is skepticism a doctrine that makes truth claims by asserting a thesis (in this case the fact that there are no well-established means of reliable cognition), or is it an altogether different approach that avoids the commitment to any claim through a complete suspension of judgment?” (Dreyfus 2011, 92). My skeptical interpretation takes Nāgārjuna’s skepticism to be of the latter kind.

As I see it, Nāgārjuna’s philosophical practice consists of two phases: in phase one, he argues *against* other theories and *in favor of* the thesis of universal emptiness, but in phase two he demonstrates that the thesis of universal emptiness not only undermines other theories, but also itself. This second phase is supposed to leave a thorough Nāgārjunian in a state of mental peace beyond unnecessary conceptualization (*prapañca*), much like the Pyrrhonian ideal of mental peace (*ataraxia*). Realist ontology and epistemology are some of the paths to dogmatic attachment and Nāgārjuna attacks realism accordingly, but various sorts of realism are not the only paths to attachment. One could become attached to emptiness itself¹⁵; it is difficult to see how attributing a positive view (anti-realism, contextualism, etc.) to Nāgārjuna can avoid causing attachment to emptiness itself.

A contextualist, empty epistemology would undermine itself eventually if fully analyzed. It would be skewered on one or more of the five horns of the argument, especially options one (which leads to infinite regress), three (which leads to circularity) and four (which can lead to either infinite regress or circularity). Westerhoff might reply that the point is not that *any* sort of *pramāṇa* is subject to this five-pronged attack, but rather that only *pramāṇas* that rely on realist assumptions are undermined while a contextualist, anti-realist epistemology is acceptable. However, if this were the case, one would expect Nāgārjuna to say something about this positive epistemological theory. According to an anti-realist interpretation Nāgārjuna leaves his readers to understand that he has an opposing positive epistemological theory. According to my skeptical interpretation the reason for Nāgārjuna’s reticence about positive epistemological theory building is straightforward: he simply does not *have* any positive epistemological theory.

My fourth criticism of Westerhoff above was that a thesis of universal emptiness cannot be established by empty *pramāṇas*. Consider the following *prasaṅga* argument using Westerhoff’s own interpretations:

- (1) “The absence of substantially existent epistemic instruments entails that there can be no argument for emptiness which works in all contexts” (Westerhoff 2010, 94).
- (2) The conclusion of an argument for *universal* emptiness must apply to all contexts (due to its universality).
- (3) However, neither this nor any other argument for emptiness could possibly apply to all contexts according to premise one.

¹⁵ See *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 13.8: “The antidote to all views is proclaimed by the conquerors to be emptiness. Those who have a view of emptiness the conquerors called incurable.”

C: Hence, there is a contradiction and universal emptiness cannot be established.¹⁶

This is a problem for Westerhoff, because he claims that this section of the VV is “the basis for an *epistemological argument for the thesis of universal emptiness*” (Westerhoff 2010, 86). I also think this is a serious problem for any interpretation that takes Nāgārjuna to be making a truth-claim about universal emptiness. The above argument faces such interpreters with a dilemma: *either* they must admit that Mādhyamikas like Nāgārjuna are committed to a thesis for which they have arguments that are insufficient due to an internal contradiction *or* they must give up the idea that Mādhyamikas are committed to the thesis of universal emptiness. Neither of these options seem palatable to those who see Nāgārjuna as accepting a final truth-claim about universal emptiness.¹⁷

My skeptical interpretation, on the other hand, embraces this dilemma: Mādhyamikas are supposed to notice that argument for universal emptiness are insufficient and they are supposed to give up their commitment to that very claim itself – the fact that such arguments are self-undermining *is itself the point*. The thesis of universal emptiness, which is defended in phase one, is designed to undermine itself in phase two. Far from being a problem, for my purely practical skeptical interpretation the issues I am raising here are intended to be *the means by which* Madhyamaka philosophers move from phase one to phase two.¹⁸

¹⁶ This is an example of an idea of Graham Priest (2002) that the combination of totality (the universal aspect) and reflexivity (the thesis is itself empty) engenders contradictions. However, Mādhyamikas could simply say that it *seems* to be the case, as far as they can tell, that emptiness is universal. A similar option was taken by the ancient Academic skeptic, Carneades, who had a “persuasive impression or a “pervasive intellectual apprehension” that knowledge is impossible (Cicero 2006, 2.99; Thorsrud 2009, 80). Or Mādhyamikas could use such arguments, as I am suggesting, eventually to help them stop making philosophical claims all together. Burton notices a somewhat similar contradiction in trying to support a thesis of universal emptiness, although he takes this as evidence that Nāgārjuna was an unwitting nihilist (Burton 1999, 5).

¹⁷ There is at least one more option: as Garfield and Priest (2002) argue, Nāgārjuna could be interpreted as asserting that there are true contradictions as in Priest’s dialetheist logic. I am not aware of scholars other than Garfield and Priest who take this route. For my part, I agree that it is possible Nāgārjuna would accept dialetheism, but there is little evidence for this claim and explicit acceptance of such a theory about logic seems to run counter to the sentiments expressed in phase two. Nonetheless, I think Priest’s dialetheism does uncover something about the structure of philosophical thought that Nāgārjuna, Sextus, and other skeptics exploit for their own ends.

¹⁸ One might wonder how my interpretation differs from that of Stefano Gandolfo (2016) according to which Nāgārjuna is a weak philosophical deflationist or dequietist. According to Gandolfo, Nāgārjuna is offering “a meta- and ultimately non-philosophical evaluation of philosophy” (Gandolfo 2016, 208). While I find myself in agreement with Gandolfo on many issues, especially on Nāgārjuna’s critical attitude toward the philosophical enterprise in general, I do not understand Gandolfo’s rejection of a therapeutic understanding of Nāgārjuna (226-227), because Nāgārjuna could himself be a quietist who, out of compassion, seeks to cure others through philosophical argument. Neither do I understand how Gandolfo’s alleged non-philosophical conventional statement about philosophy could avoid the dilemma of either turning out to be a species of global anti-realism (*à la* Siderits and Westerhoff) or undermining itself in the same way as all other statements entering Nāgārjuna’s sphere of criticism.

4. THE USES OF SKEPTICISM: A PRACTICAL-THEORETICAL CONTINUUM

Pyrrhonians use Agrippa's Trilemma and the Five Modes for the practical purpose of suspending judgment on epistemological questions rather than establishing any theory. While such an approach could be called therapeutic insofar as Sextus considers himself to be offering something akin to medical treatment (e.g., PH 3.280-281), I do not mean to suggest that all practical purposes are therapeutic. For instance, mystical philosophers might consider their work to be practical in terms of leading to desired mental states without considering this process to be akin to medical treatment or psychological therapy.

On the other hand, modern versions of epistemological skepticism use similar skeptical arguments for the purpose of raising issues concerning the possibility of knowledge as a theoretical activity with no particular practical aim. Contemporary skeptical considerations may in fact have the side-effect of making one less dogmatic, more discerning, and so on, but this is not conceived of as their main purpose. The skeptical threat posed by the problem of the criterion is that if we are unable to establish either a general criterion or any specific cases of knowledge, we should conclude that knowledge is impossible, or at least, following Andrew Cling (2014), that a certain kind of metaepistemological knowledge about knowledge is impossible. The contemporary activity of considering or accepting a skeptical thesis is not tied to any practical goal or particular way of life. As Barry Stroud puts it,

In modern, and especially recent, times scepticism in philosophy has come to be understood as the view that we know nothing, or that nothing is certain, or that everything is open to doubt. That is a thesis or doctrine about the human condition, not itself a way of life. It is thought to rest on many of the same considerations ancient sceptics might have invoked in freeing themselves from their opinions or the opinions of others, but as a philosophical thesis it does not obviously lead to any one way of life rather than another, let alone to tranquility or human happiness. (Stroud 1984, vii)

Nonetheless, at least one contemporary epistemologist, Peter Unger (1975), has argued that skeptical considerations ought to have profound effects on our beliefs about common sense and language; however, Unger's radical skeptical position is extremely rare (he himself later rejected it) and in any case it is still concerned primarily with belief rather than practice and it is not tied to any articulated way of life.

Furthermore, some philosophers, such as Stoics and Nyāya philosophers, might conceive of the consideration of skeptical issues to be both practical and theoretical insofar as it is coming to hold correct theoretical beliefs on epistemological issues that leads to the desired practical effect. For most philosophers, the practical-theoretical question is one of emphasis: while Hellenistic Stoics, Naiyāyikas, and

Can one critique philosophy without doing philosophy? While Gandolfo seems to say yes, my inclination is to say no, which is why Nāgārjuna's statements should be seen as purely therapeutic.

contemporary analytic philosophers all pursue theoretical aims, Hellenistic Stoics and Naiyāyikas emphasized their practical aims to a far greater extent than most analytic epistemologists today. What is unusual about Sextus is that the aim of his skeptical arguments is thoroughly practical at the complete expense of the theoretical. Sextus's aim is *ataraxia*, which is not cultivated by developing some further theory about the limits of knowledge but rather by eschewing such theories all together.

I am not attempting to present mutually exclusive definitions of practical and theoretical purposes. I doubt a precise demarcation between the two could be made that would eliminate all grey areas¹⁹; luckily, doing so is not required for my purposes here. Rather than thinking of practical and theoretical purposes as two strictly delineated categories, we might envision a continuum of purposes with Sextus at one end as purely practical and contemporary epistemologists at the other as mainly – if not entirely – theoretical.

Where, then, does Nāgārjuna lie on the practical-theoretical continuum? As a Buddhist philosopher aiming at the eradication of suffering, Nāgārjuna will necessarily be further down the practical side of the continuum than the average contemporary epistemologist, but is he as far down the practical side of the continuum as Pyrrhonian skeptics? Or should we see Nāgārjuna as an epistemological skeptic who asserts a thesis that knowledge is impossible or as a contextualist epistemologist, even if his thesis itself has some connection to Buddhist practical goals? Matilal sometimes seems to see Nāgārjuna as an epistemological skeptic. For instance, he claims, “It is his contention that in the long run the concept of the standard of proof would be found to be self-refuting or self-stultifying” (Matilal 1986, 51). This indicates that Matilal thinks Nāgārjuna has a “contention” about knowledge claims. One might also argue that since Nāgārjuna ostensibly denies both the particularist and generalist responses to the problem of the criterion in denying that the *prameyas* can establish the *pramāṇas* (particularism) and that the *pramāṇas* can establish the *prameyas* (generalism), he should be read as an epistemological skeptic closer to the theoretical end of the practical-theoretical continuum, or at any rate much closer to that end than Pyrrhonian skeptics.²⁰ Likewise, Westerhoff and others

¹⁹ Here is one possible grey area: Would pursuing skeptical issues primarily in order to enrich one's critical thinking skills or to learn about the history of skepticism be a practical purpose? But what if one came to realize that developing critical thinking skills or historical knowledge was itself relevant to the theoretical consideration of skeptical issues, perhaps because doing so develops one's intellectual virtue and philosophical imagination?

²⁰ There is also another option for answering the problem of the criterion: a reflective equilibrium between particular cases of knowledge and general epistemic principles. This would seem to be the path taken in Westerhoff's Madhyamaka epistemology. However, as Fumerton 2008 claims and Westerhoff would probably admit, this requires a coherentist theory of justification. Then the question really becomes whether coherentism is true, which is of course outside the scope of this humble footnote. However, it is worth considering Fumerton's appraisal: “... I am not interested in whether someone rests comfortably with a belief system in reflective equilibrium, regardless of the subject matter of those beliefs. I have known many a philosopher, and the odd paranoid schizophrenic, with wonderfully coherent belief systems where I am quite convinced that the beliefs are mostly false and mostly irrational” (Fumerton 2008, 49).

who see Nāgārjuna as presenting a contextualist epistemological thesis would similarly place him closer to the theoretical end of the continuum.

Here I appeal to what I call phase two statements. Like Sextus, Nāgārjuna is not an epistemological skeptic who denies the possibility of knowledge. If we take Nāgārjuna at his word in those types of statements, he simply cannot be a theoretical epistemological skeptic, whereas, if he were more like a Pyrrhonian skeptic, this is precisely the kind of thing he *would* say.

There are several things to be said in favor of my purely practical interpretation. First, it makes more sense of phase two statements. Second, it allows us to be more charitable in seeing that Nāgārjuna not only understood that the thesis of universal emptiness is self-undermining, but he saw this as a crucial step toward his practical goal. This is in opposition to those who see his arguments as successfully establishing a thesis of universal emptiness as much as it is in opposition to those who see his arguments as attempting, but failing, to establish a thesis of universal emptiness (e.g., Burton 1999, Hayes 1994). Nāgārjuna does eventually fail to establish a thesis of universal emptiness, but that was never his ultimate intention. Third, it makes sense of the observation that these are general patterns that can be applied – and in fact were applied, as I will show in the next section – to other epistemological theories. Fourth, Nāgārjuna never says anything about developing any epistemology even as a basic description of our epistemic practices.

Why could an anti-realist, contextualist epistemology not be provisionally accepted as part of phase one? I agree that it could be, even though Nāgārjuna never said anything about such positive theories. Many later Mādhyamikas, such as Bhāvaviveka and Tsongkhapa, developed constructive epistemological theories. My disagreement concerns the status of such theories. As provisional steps on the way to the emptiness of emptiness and the relinquishing of all views, such theories could perhaps provide needed therapy. But such theorizing often leads to dogmatism by other means. It is difficult to relinquish all views when one is developing new views of one's own.

5. CANDRAKĪRTI'S THERAPEUTIC COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

Nonetheless, some readers might object that, while it may not be entirely clear that Nāgārjuna has positive, constructive epistemological theories, we might find an endorsement of constructive Madhyamaka epistemology in the work of the later Mādhyamika, Candrakīrti (c. 7th century CE), especially in his critique of the epistemology of Dignāga (c. 480-540 CE). If this is right, perhaps Candrakīrti demonstrates the epistemological theory implicit in Nāgārjuna's texts, which in turn would show that my reading of Nāgārjuna is incorrect insofar as I make the claim that Nāgārjuna's VV neither contains nor implies an epistemological theory.

My answer to this is that it is far from obvious that Candrakīrti has a positive epistemological theory; in fact, I think Candrakīrti's attack on Dignāgan epistemology is fully in line with the purely practical purpose of eschewing attempts to establish any epistemological theory. While I will not discuss the entirety of

Candrakīrti's critique here, some discussion of the overall purpose of this section should allow readers to see how Candrakīrti's individual arguments fall into place. In his *Prasannapadā* (hereafter, PP), Candrakīrti considers a claim from a proponent of Dignāga's epistemological system and questions it as follows:

But if you were to say, "This worldly practice of *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* is described by our treatise," then you need to say what the purpose of the explanation of that [i.e., that worldly practice] is. If you were to respond, "We state a correct definition of that, which is destroyed by bad logicians through expounding mixed-up definitions," even this does not make sense. For if ordinary people were to have an error concerning the things to be defined, an error made by bad logicians due to bringing forward mixed-up definitions, then the effort toward that goal [of correcting definitions] would be fruitful. But none of this is the case. Therefore, this effort is entirely pointless. (PP, 20, lines 13-17)

In other words, Candrakīrti argues that Dignāga's epistemology has no point, since people's epistemic practices are not erroneous (at least not at the conventional level). Candrakīrti goes on to mention the looming infinite regress (similar to that discussed in VV 30-32), which is one example of how he builds on Nāgārjuna's argument in the VV. Candrakīrti continues in some detail to apply similar concerns to the problem of how the *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* are defined. This section includes a clever argument against the very coherence of Dignāga's theory of a strict dualism of *pramāṇas* due to strict dualism of *prameyas*.²¹ But here I will concentrate on the passage quoted above, since it tells us much about what Candrakīrti takes himself to be doing.

Candrakīrti seems to deny that ordinary people (*loka*) are in error about their everyday epistemic practice. Many readers of Candrakīrti take this passage to indicate that the main thrust of his criticism is that Dignāgan epistemology violates the standards of conventional epistemic practice and that this is contrary to a Madhyamaka claim that developing some sort of epistemology of conventional epistemic practice is a worthwhile endeavor. These claims range from Siderits's relatively mild claim that Madhyamaka epistemology is purely descriptive (Siderits 1981, 158) and Dreyfus and Garfield's interpretation of Candrakīrti as a "Constructive Pyrrhonian" engaging in descriptive epistemology (Dreyfus and Garfield 2011, 126) to Arnold's somewhat stronger claim that such descriptions constitute a transcendental argument for emptiness (Arnold 2005, 117) and Westerhoff's rather strong endorsement – discussed earlier – of a contextualist, coherentist epistemology of empty *pramāṇas* (Westerhoff 2010, 69, 82).

While I greatly respect all of these scholars, I think they have been taken in. They have been led astray by the cleverness of Candrakīrti's arguments and take his

²¹ Candrakīrti argues against it as follows: "Furthermore, if it is said that there are two *pramāṇas* through adherence to two characteristics – particular and universal, then that characterized thing, of which there are two characterizing marks (i.e., particular and universal), does that exist, or on the other hand, does it not exist? If it exists, then there is another third *prameya* than those two, so how are there two *pramāṇas*? On the other hand, if that which is characterized does *not* exist, then the characterization is also without a basis, so how could there be two *pramāṇas*?" (PP, p. 20, lines 20-23). For more on this argument, see Mills 2015.

criticisms a little too seriously. I suggest another possibility: Candrakīrti's discussions of conventional practice are themselves purely practical and therapeutic – they are not meant to be taken as any sort of constructive epistemology. What can be said for this interpretation?

First, consider what a description of conventional epistemic practice would actually look like and what it could accomplish. I do not think there would be much to say. Human beings can master conventions by imitation and everyday instruction, but we simply do not need philosophers to explain this practice to us. I think this is precisely Candrakīrti's point. While I am puzzled that Candrakīrti thinks Dignāga ever wanted to describe conventional practice (Dignāga's whole point seems to be to challenge our everyday beliefs), it is likely that later philosophers, such as Dharmakīrti or his predecessors, thought a description of conventional practice was a worthwhile project because they felt that inference (*anumāna*) would only work at the level of conventional truth.²² But then it does not make sense that Candrakīrti would decry Dignāgas for thinking they can instruct ordinary people while simultaneously thinking he could instruct ordinary people in what they already do quite well. This would be like an amateur basketball fan wanting to teach a professional player how to dribble.

What does make sense is that compassionate philosophers such as Candrakīrti might remind other philosophers about conventional practice as a therapy to get them to stop doing philosophy. This is much like therapeutic interpretations of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* that are inspired by statements such as, "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. ... There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (Wittgenstein 2001, Sec. 133).²³ I am not trying to draw any strong comparison between Wittgenstein and Candrakīrti²⁴, but if

²² I agree with Hayes 1988 that Dignāga is a "rational skeptic" who wants to demonstrate that very few of our beliefs are in fact justified, which seems quite at odds with the idea that Dignāga wants to explain conventional practice. Hayes (personal communication) has suggested that Candrakīrti's seeming-misreading may be due to Dharmakīrti or his predecessors and their view that inference (*anumāna*) is a conventional matter while perception (*pratyakṣa*) is an ultimate matter, a view Hayes thinks was not Dignāga's in the first place. Also, John Taber (personal communication) has pointed out that Dharmakīrti does explicitly state that Dignāga's epistemology only applies everyday practice (*vyvāhāra*) in his *Pramāṇaviniścaya*.

²³ There are several different versions of therapeutic interpretations of Wittgenstein. Some, such as Peterman 1992 and Kern 2004, see Wittgenstein's therapy as involving various truth-claims about the human form of life and so forth, whereas others, such as Kuusela 2008 and Fogelin 2009, see Wittgenstein's therapy as something that does not involve the defense of philosophical theses, but as purely therapeutic. For a Pyrrhonian reading of Wittgenstein, see Fogelin 1994, 205-222; for criticisms of Fogelin's reading see Sluga 2004 and Peterman 1992, 128-129.

²⁴ See Gudmunsen 1977 for a more in-depth comparison of Wittgenstein and Buddhist philosophers, especially Nāgārjuna. While I cannot evaluate all of his comparisons here, I do agree with Gudmunsen that for both Wittgenstein and Madhyamaka, "Getting rid of theories is like a medical cure" (Gudmunsen 1977, 45). While some recent scholars (e.g., Dreyfus and Garfield 2011) see both Wittgenstein and Candrakīrti as having constructive aims and compare the two accordingly, I am not so sure either philosopher has any designs on constructive philosophy. One further point of comparison

Candrakīrti is engaging in philosophical therapy, we need not see the therapist himself, Candrakīrti, as actually endorsing any sort of claim about *pramāṇas* and *prameyas*. At most, he needs to convince the other philosophers to temporarily endorse such descriptions, but if they consistently follow Candrakīrti to phase two, they would eventually stop doing even that.

Second, my skeptical interpretation can make more sense of why Candrakīrti discusses Nyāya epistemology. Candrakīrti seems to affirm the Nyāya *pramāṇas* of inference (*anumāna*), testimony (*āgama*), and comparison (*upamāna*) – perception is left out because he has just been discussing it in detail – and he even says, “these are established by mutual dependence” (PP 25, lines 21-26).²⁵ He ends this section by saying, “Therefore, let these very worldly things be as they are experienced” (PP 25, line 27).²⁶ All this seems especially strange since Candrakīrti cites the VV by name and alludes to the rejection of a mutual establishment of *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* in VV 46-48: “Moreover, a defect is decreed in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, ‘If understanding a *prameya* is dependent on a *pramāṇa*, then by what are these *pramāṇas* determined?’” (PP 20, line 18).²⁷ Although Candrakīrti is saying that this defect applies to Dignāga’s epistemology in the previous quote, it shows that he was aware of (and presumably agreed with) Nāgārjuna’s wholesale denial of Nyāya epistemology.

Of course, it is possible that “we must take Candrakīrti’s endorsement of certain Nyāya theories as less than a wholesale endorsement of their entire system” (Siderits 1981, 157). But why take it as an “endorsement” at all? A purely therapeutic interpretation allows us to take Candrakīrti as using Nyāya as just one strategy in his therapeutic bag of tricks. If people are too attached to theory *A*, a good way to lessen their attachment is to get them to see the good points of opposing theory *B*. If

is that many readers of both Wittgenstein and Candrakīrti mistake their therapeutic use of various ideas (language-games, forms of life, emptiness, dependent origination, etc.) as positive philosophical endorsements of theories about such ideas.

²⁵ *tāni ca parasparāpekṣayā sidhyanti*. PP 25, line 26.

²⁶ *tasmāl laukikam evāstu yathādr̥ṣṭam iti*. PP 25, line 27. Siderits translates this as, “Therefore the worldly should be [described] just as it is [ordinarily] experienced” (Siderits 1981, 156). Square brackets are normally innocuous enough, but here the insertion of “described” only works if, like Siderits says and Sprung seems to agree (Sprung 1979, 64 n. 2), there is some task of description that Mādhyamikas ought to engage in. I take the “*astu*” straightforwardly to mean, “let it be,” because I think Candrakīrti’s point is that if you have a hankering for common sense epistemology, look to the Naiyāyikas (up to a point, anyway). Buddhists, on the other hand, should just let the conventional world be without any epistemological meddling. Siderits might take the previous sentence, “But there is no establishing at all of *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* which has its own nature” (*no tu khalu svābhāvīkī pramāṇaprameyahoh siddhir iti*), as evidence for his interpretation, since it seems to deny epistemology only insofar as its arguments proceed essentially (*svābhāvīkī*, lit. having its own nature). However, I think Candrakīrti is still working within the Nyāya framework here and pointing out that Naiyāyikas try to mutually establish the *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* rather than each one in itself. The *svābhāvīkī* here is not necessarily used in the technical sense deriving from the Abhidharma Buddhist concept of essence (*svabhāva*), but is simply the view that opposes the Naiyāyikas’ mutual establishing.

²⁷ *api ca/ yadi pramāṇādhīnaḥ prameyādhīgamaḥ, tāni pramāṇāni kena paricchanta ity ādinā vigrahavyāvartanyāṃ vihito doṣaḥ/* PP 20, line 18.

Dignāgans are too attached to their stark, non-commonsensual epistemology, one way to lessen this attachment is to show them that an epistemology that at least professes to be commonsensual is just as good, if not better. Such a procedure of therapeutic counter-argument is in the Pyrrhonian bags of tricks. I maintain that it is also in Candrakīrti's. The therapy works like this: Dignāgans should look to Nyāya to get them away from Dignāga, but then they should look to Nāgārjuna's VV to get them out of Nyāya and into the positionlessness of phase two.

Third, Candrakīrti follows Nāgārjuna in making both phase one and phase two statements. In his commentary on MMK 13.8 and 25.24 Candrakīrti does not at all shrink away from taking such statements of positionlessness at face value. He could have interpreted these statements to mean "all *false* views" as other commentators such as Tsongkhapa and Khedrupjey have done (Garfield 2002, 47). Since he did not, he seems to take Nāgārjuna at his word. Thus, all of the reasons I gave for attributing purely practical skepticism to Nāgārjuna apply just as equally to Candrakīrti, and we should interpret anything that seems like a positive endorsement of epistemology as provisional statement that must be relinquished at some point.

While Candrakīrti makes use of Nāgārjuna's "*pañcakoti*" in a piecemeal fashion, Candrakīrti's argumentative strategies are entirely compatible with my interpretation of Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti use various argumentative strategies, including the "*pañcakoti*" and therapeutic counter-arguments, to guide readers from the emptiness of phase one to the mental peace of phase two – the cessation of conceptual proliferation and the relinquishment of all views. It is simply not the case that Candrakīrti demonstrates the epistemological theory implicit in the VV. Therefore, my contention that Nāgārjuna's "*pañcakoti*" serves a purely practical purpose similar to that of Agrippa's Trilemma for Pyrrhonian skeptics is not in any way hampered by a careful reading of Candrakīrti.

6. CONCLUSIONS

What to make of all this? I draw two conclusions. First, Nāgārjuna raised issues similar to Agrippa's Trilemma and the problem of the criterion for purposes in line with purely practical purposes such as those of the Pyrrhonian skeptics, and this interpretation is equally applicable to the later Mādhyamika Candrakīrti. Second, that these issues are present in at least two historical traditions of epistemology gives us some reason to think that they are issues that are likely to arise when a tradition of epistemological inquiry takes place. This is not merely an appeal to popularity, but a legitimate appeal to the authority of some of the previous travelers on the roads of epistemology. Recent epistemologists such as Michael Williams, Peter Klein, Richard Fumerton, Robert Fogelin, and others have been doing interesting theoretical work on the problem of the criterion.²⁸ Therapeutic tendencies have likewise survived in the

²⁸ Williams and Klein focus on Agrippa's Trilemma (Williams 1996, 60-68 and Klein 2003). Williams's Wittgensteinian-style contextualism and "methodological necessities" imply that he favors an approach in which the first horn of the trilemma (basic assumption) is taken up in accordance with the context of inquiry, i.e., specific things can be assumed given the inquiry in which they are

work of Wittgenstein.²⁹ In considering these issues, whether theoretically or practically, I think we would do well to remember that philosophers have been thinking through these issues for thousands of years. While issues of epistemological criteria are well worth continued theoretical and perhaps therapeutic work, ancients such as Agrippa and Nāgārjuna teach us that, as with any deep philosophical problem, satisfactory solutions may continue to elude us.

My conclusions here may also prove to be useful outside the relatively narrow domains of academic studies of skepticism and Buddhist philosophy. Given the increasing pressures to demonstrate the value of philosophy both as a discipline and as a form of inquiry, deeper attention to the practical uses of philosophy, such as those I have demonstrated here, could be fruitful. This is especially true when engaging in public philosophy in the philosophy-to-public direction discussed by Anand Vaidya (2015). While some members of the general public may be interested in theoretical issues of knowledge and I in no way mean to belittle such interests, philosophy's value might be more widely demonstrated as a way of addressing practical issues of human life. The modern Stoicism movement, for example, has popularized the Hellenistic notion of philosophy as a way of life, especially through the promotion of Stoic Week, in which a handbook guides participants in the application of ancient Stoic exercises to their own lives.³⁰

Practical skeptical responses to issues concerning the criteria of knowledge might likewise prove relevant today. Not only can the argumentative strategies employed by ancient philosophers like Sextus and Nāgārjuna be used to sharpen one's critical thinking skills, the goal of practical skepticism – the dissolution of dogmatic attachment to one's beliefs – could provide a soothing balm to the crackling dogmatism of our contemporary political, religious, and philosophical discourses. In a world that often encourages facile, insubstantial belief, a bit of ancient skeptical therapy could do some good. It would also be an excellent way to demonstrate one of the key benefits of philosophical study: the cultivation of epistemic modesty. And if skeptical arguments are right (or at least compelling), the outcome of cultivating epistemic modesty is far easier to demonstrate than the truth any of the positive epistemological theories developed over the centuries. Philosophy is not useless

embedded. Klein, on the other hand, takes a position he calls “indefinitism,” which is “the view that the answer to the regress problem is that the regress never properly ends” (Klein 2003, 86). That is, Klein embraces the third horn of the trilemma (infinite regress). Fumerton 2008 gives a nice overview of contemporary treatments of the issue. Fogelin 1994, Chs. 6-9, uses Agrippa's modes to evaluate (unfavorably) contemporary theories of justification such as Chisholm's internalist foundationalism, Bonjour's internalist coherentism, and Davidson's externalist coherentism. See also Sankey 2010, which considers (and rejects) a relativist response to the problem of the criterion, and Cling 2014, which argues that there are resources for antiskeptical solutions to the problem of the criterion and the epistemic regress problem in an “attunement” model of reasons (according to which some reasons have epistemic standing insofar as they attune an organism with the world without themselves requiring further reasons).

²⁹ I am thankful to Django Runyan for reminding me of this point. Some therapeutic interpretations of later Wittgenstein are Peterman 1992, Kern 2004, Kuusela 2008, and Fogelin 2009.

³⁰ For more on modern Stoicism and Stoic Week, see: <http://modernstoicism.com>.

because it yields few if any certain answers; it is useful precisely in that it shows us how elusive such answers have been and continue to be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I presented causal ancestors of this paper at the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy Annual Conference at Southern Illinois University Carbondale in October 2012 and, at the gracious invitation of Dr. Anand Vaidya, at San José State University in October 2015. I am grateful to both audiences for valuable feedback. In Spring 2016 I was lucky to teach a course called Skepticism East and West at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; I am thankful to the students in this course for helping me think through these and other issues in comparative skepticism. In Spring 2016 I also benefitted from participating in a Research and Scholarship Professional Development Group at the Walker Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; I thank this group – especially the organizers, Dr. Angela Prince and Mary Marr, MAT – for helping me to complete a draft of this paper during a busy semester. Lastly, I would like to thank one anonymous referee for his/her helpful comments and suggestions.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, Dan (2005), *Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass).
- Beckwith, Christopher I. (2015), *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Burnyeat, Myles and Michael Frede (eds.) (1997), *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy* (Indianapolis: Hackett).
- Burton, David (1999), *Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass).
- Candrakīrti (1960), *Prasannapadā*, in P. L. Vaidya (ed.), *Madhyamakśāstra of Nāgārjuna (Mūlamadhyamakakārikās) with the Commentary Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti* (Dharbanga: Mithila Institute).
- Chisholm, Roderick (1957), *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- (1973), *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press).
- (1977), *Theory of Knowledge, Second Edition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall).
- Cicero (2006), *On Academic Scepticism*, trans. Charles Brittain (Indianapolis: Hackett).
- Cling, Andrew D. (2014), “The Epistemic Regress Problem, the Problem of the Criterion, and the Value of Reasons”, *Metaphilosophy*, 45(2): 161-171.

- Dreyfus, Georges (2011), “Can a Mādhyamika be a Skeptic? The Case of Patsab Nyimadrak”, in The Cowherds (eds.), *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 89-113.
- Dreyfus, Georges and Jay L. Garfield (2011), “Madhyamaka and Classical Greek Skepticism”, in The Cowherds (eds.), *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 115-130.
- Flintoff, Everard (1980), “Pyrrho and India”, *Phronesis*, 25: 88-108.
- Fogelin, Robert J. (1994), *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (2009), *Taking Wittgenstein at his Word* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Fumerton, Richard (2008), “The Problem of the Criterion”, in John Greco (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 34-52.
- Gandolfo, Stefano (2016), “The Positionless Middle Way: Weak Philosophical Deflationism in Madhyamaka”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 44: 207-228.
- Garfield, Jay L. (2002), *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross Cultural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Garfield, Jay L. and Graham Priest (2002), “Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Thought”, in Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross Cultural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press), 86-105; reprinted in Priest (2002), *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 249-270.
- Gudmunsen, Chris (1977), *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* (London: Macmillan).
- Hadot, Pierre (1995), *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase, (Cambridge: Blackwell).
- Hayes, Richard (1988), *Dignāga on the Interpretation of Signs* (Boston: Kluwer).
- (1994), “Nāgārjuna’s Appeal”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22: 299-378.
- Kern, Andrea (2004), “Understanding Scepticism: Wittgenstein’s Paradoxical Reinterpretation of Sceptical Doubt”, in Denis McManus (ed.), *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, (New York: Routledge), 200-217.
- Klein, Peter (2003), “How a Pyrrhonian Skeptic Might Respond to Academic Skepticism”, in Steven Luper (ed.), *The Sceptics: Contemporary Essays*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate), 75-94.
- Kornblith, Hilary (2003), “Roderick Chisholm and the Shaping of American Epistemology”, *Metaphilosophy*, 34(5), 582-602.
- Kuusela, Oskari (2008), *The Struggle Against Dogmatism: Wittgenstein and the Conception of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Kuzminski, Adrian (2008), *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Boulder: Lexington Books).
- Matilal, Bimal Krishna (1986), *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- (2002), “Scepticism and Mysticism”, in Jonardon Ganeri (ed.), *Mind, Language and World: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 72-83.

- McEvelley, Thomas (2002), *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press).
- Mills, Ethan (2015), “On the Coherence of Dignāga’s Epistemology: Evaluating the Critiques of Candrakīrti and Jayarāsi”, *Asian Philosophy*, 25 (4): 339-357.
- Nāgārjuna (1994), *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV), ed. and trans. Thomas L. Wood, in Thomas L. Wood, *Nāgārjunian Disputations: A Philosophical Journey Through an Indian Looking-Glass*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), 307-322.
- (1997), *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), ed. and trans. Nancy McGagney, in Nancy McGagney, *Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of Openness*, (New York: Roman and Littlefield).
- (2010), *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV), trans. Jan Westerhoff, in Jan Westerhoff, *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna’s Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Nussbaum, Martha (1994), *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Peterman, James (1992), *Philosophy as Therapy: An Interpretation and Defense of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophical Project* (Albany: SUNY Press).
- Priest, Graham (2002), *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Sankey, Howard (2010), “Witchcraft, Relativism, and the Problem of the Criterion”, *Erkenntnis*, 72: 1-16.
- Sextus Empiricus (2000), *Outlines of Scepticism* (PH), trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Siderits, Mark (1980), “The Madhyamaka Critique of Epistemology I”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 8: 307-335.
- (1981), “The Madhyamaka Critique of Epistemology II”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 9: 121-160.
- (2000), “Nāgārjuna as Anti-Realist”, in Roy Perrett (ed.), *Indian Philosophy: A Collection of Readings: Epistemology* (New York: Garland Publishing), 11-15.
- Spring, Mervyn (1979), *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*, trans Mervyn Sprung in collaboration with T. R. V. Murti and U. S. Vyas (Boulder: Prajñā Press).
- Stroud, Barry (1984), *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Thorsrud, Harald (2009), *Ancient Scepticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Unger, Peter (1975), *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Vaidya, Anand Jayprakash (2015), “Public Philosophy: Cross-Cultural and Multi-Disciplinary”, *Comparative Philosophy* 6 (2): 35-75.
- Westerhoff, Jan (2009), *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (2010), *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna’s Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Williams, Michael (1988), "Scepticism Without Theory", *Review of Metaphysics*, 41: 547-588.
- (1996), *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).