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Ethan Mills

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**THE DEPENDENT ORIGINATION OF SKEPTICISM IN CLASSICAL INDIA:
AN EXPERIMENT IN CROSS-CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY**

BY

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B.A., Philosophy, Hamline University, 1999
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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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DEDICATION

To the memory of my mother, Linda Mills (1949-2000), who instilled in me the love of life and learning that brought me this far. Thanks, Mom.

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ABSTRACT

I begin with the question of whether the problem of philosophical skepticism is inevitable, a question that was answered affirmatively by Hume and has come to be a source of debate in contemporary epistemology. If skepticism is an inevitable problem, then it should arise in any sufficiently sophisticated tradition of epistemology such as the tradition found in classical India. The Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu gives arguments from ignorance based on dreams that are quite similar to the dream argument of Descartes. However, while Vasubandhu's arguments give an invitation to skeptical concerns (especially if he is a phenomenalist, rather than an idealist), this invitation was not accepted in quite the same way as it has been by Western philosophers.

Yet there is another form of skepticism in Indian philosophy, which is more like Pyrrhonian skepticism. I call this metaphilosophical skepticism, which consists of doubts about the possibility of philosophy itself. Reading the Madhyamaka Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna as a metaphilosophical skeptic solves the puzzle of how to reconcile his arguments for the view of emptiness with his injunctions against holding any view whatsoever. Jayarāśi, a skeptical member of the irreligious Cārvāka school, refutes any positive epistemological theory and embodies a contextualism that makes room to enjoy everyday practice. Thus, skeptical concerns in classical India invite us to question what we think we know about issues of philosophical skepticism. I conclude by considering what it is that allows concerns about metaphilosophical skepticism to arise in a philosophical tradition, arguing that it is this type of skeptical concern, rather than the problem of external world skepticism, that may be inevitable.

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Chapter One

Is Skepticism an Intuitive Problem?

“I think that when we first encounter ... sceptical reasoning ... we find it immediately gripping. It appeals to something deep in our nature and seems to raise a real problem about the human condition.”

- Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*

“The Humean condition and the human condition are not the same.”

- Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*

Is the problem of skepticism inevitable? Does it arise whenever philosophically reflective people consider epistemological questions? Is skepticism an issue lying deep within the human condition, waiting to be discovered along with other perennial problems of philosophy? In contemporary epistemology some philosophers, such as Barry Stroud, have taken the position that a concern about skepticism is an inevitable part of the human condition, while others, such as Michael Williams, argue that epistemology's contemporary concern about skepticism is the result of contingent theoretical presuppositions (Stroud 1984; Williams 1996).

My plan for this chapter is to describe the debate between those who agree with Stroud, whose position I will call the “intuitive thesis,” and those who agree with Williams that skepticism can be successfully “diagnosed” so that it is no longer a serious philosophical problem. I will also explain why I think this debate is important for epistemologists, and I will consider some Western discussions of the issue from Hume until today. After considering these attempted resolutions of the debate, I suggest that one way to come toward an answer is to look to other philosophical traditions, such as the rich philosophical traditions of India, to engage in an experiment in cross-cultural

philosophy. If we find something like a consideration of skepticism in Indian philosophy, then Stroud's theory gains some support. If not, then we have some reason to side with Williams. Before beginning this experiment in chapter two, I end this chapter with some methodological considerations and a preview of the chapters to come. These chapters will form an argument for the overall thesis of this dissertation that the problem of external-world skepticism does not seem to be an intuitive part of the human condition that forms a pervasive part of any epistemological tradition, but a concern about another kind of skepticism – skepticism about philosophy – is a cross-cultural phenomenon that is often a natural result of philosophical endeavors.

1.1 The intuitive thesis and diagnosing skepticism

Proponents of the intuitive character of skepticism as a philosophical problem, or as I will call it here, “the intuitive thesis,” do not claim that all human beings wonder if they might be dreaming or if they could be brains-in-vats; this is obviously false, since the vast majority of human beings never seriously consider such problems. Rather, the thesis is that when presented with problems such as what is often called “the problem of the external world,” people in philosophically reflective moods will be gripped by a naturally occurring problem. They are presented with intuitively-compelling premises and a logically valid argument for one of the most absurd conclusions imaginable: that nobody knows anything about the external world.¹ Such skepticism is often based on an

¹ I will take the problem of the external world as the paradigm case of epistemological skepticism, although other problems such as the problem of other minds motivate the same kind of epistemological skepticism. I

argument from ignorance of the kind found in Descartes's First Meditation. The basic argument is this:

1. If you know things about the external world, then you must know you are not dreaming.
2. But you do *not* know you are not dreaming.
- C. Therefore, you do not know things about the external world.

One may freely insert one's favorite skeptical hypothesis: hallucination, computer simulations, brains-in-a-vat, etc. But the basic idea is the same: because we can't tell the difference between how we think the world is and how things could be in some crazy skeptical scenario, all our knowledge of the external world is dispatched with by a simple *modus tollens* syllogism.

This problem is intuitive if skepticism is "latent in our most ordinary ways of thinking about knowledge and justification" (Williams 1996, 174). Proponents of the intuitive thesis agree with Stroud: "I think that when we first encounter ... sceptical reasoning ... we find it immediately gripping. It appeals to something deep in our nature and seems to raise a real problem about the human condition" (Stroud 1984, 39).² I imagine many who study epistemology can relate to Stroud to some extent. Arguments from ignorance certainly seem to persuade us to accept their bizarre conclusion and the depth of such reasoning makes it appear to be an inescapable part of what it means to be human.³

will say more about this kind of skepticism and how it differs from other kinds of skepticism in chapter two, section 2.8.

² While Stroud claims that skepticism is intuitive, he does distinguish modern external world skepticism from ancient forms of skepticism, which constitute a way of life: "In modern ... times scepticism in philosophy has come to be understood as the view that we know nothing... 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 opposing the doctrines of others, but as a philosophical thesis it does not obviously lead to any one way of life rather than another ..." (Stroud 1984, vii).

³ For a recent defense of the naturalness of skeptical doubts, see Rudd 2008.

But not everyone agrees. Michael Williams refers to those who accept the intuitive nature of skepticism as “New Humeans,” contemporary philosophers for whom “the central Humean themes – scepticism as the apparently inevitable outcome of the quest for philosophical understanding, and the consequent clash between philosophy and ordinary life – play a decisive role in shaping their philosophical conclusions” (Williams 1996, xiii). Williams sees Stroud as the paradigm New Humean.⁴ In opposition to the New Humeans, Williams puts forward a “theoretical diagnosis” of skepticism, the aim of which “is to show that sceptical arguments derive their force, not from commonsensical intuitions about knowledge, but from theoretical ideas we are by no means bound to accept” (Williams 1996, xvii). Williams’s particular diagnosis is that skepticism relies on what he calls “epistemological realism.” He defines this thesis in the following passage.

... if human knowledge is to constitute a genuine kind of thing ... there must be underlying epistemological structures or principles, [and] the traditional epistemologist is committed to *epistemological realism*. This is not realism within epistemology – the thesis that we have knowledge of an objective, mind-independent reality – but something quite different: realism about the objects of epistemological inquiry. (Williams 1996, 108)

Thus, Williams denies that skepticism is intuitive; instead it relies on a specific theoretical presupposition. Epistemological realism asserts that there are “objects of epistemological inquiry” and that such objects constitute natural kinds that stand in need of discovery or clarification by epistemologists. Examples of such objects are structures underlying all human knowledge and “knowledge of the world *as such*,” or the idea of one generic source for all knowledge of the external world (Williams 1996, 103). Such

⁴ According to Williams, other New Humeans are Thomas Nagel, P. F. Strawson, Crispin Wright, and Bernard Williams (Nagel 1986; Strawson 1985; Wright 1985; B. Williams 1978). For example, Bernard Williams claims, “Knowledge does have a problematical character, and does have something in it which offers a standing invitation to scepticism” (B. Williams 1978, 64).

“objects” are not particular objects of perception such as tables and chairs or particular cognitions, but more abstract theoretical objects that Williams, following Stanley Cavell, calls “generic objects.” Williams says, “... claims involving generic objects ... are intended as generic – thus representative – claims. Reference to generic objects is a generalizing device” (Williams 2004, 192). In other words, epistemological realism allows epistemologists to investigate knowledge *in general*, rather than specific episodes of knowledge (e.g., “I know this is a Siamese cat as opposed to a Himalayan”) or specific kinds of knowledge (e.g., agriculture, library and information science, mathematics, etc.).⁵

Williams denies the assumption of epistemological realism and puts forward a somewhat Wittgensteinian version of contextualism in which there is no “knowledge as such” but rather different kinds of inquiry, each governed by its own particular theoretical presuppositions called “methodological necessities.” For Williams, there simply is no such thing as “knowledge as such” over and above the different kinds of inquiry; there is knowledge of cat breeding, knowledge of library and information science, knowledge of mathematics, etc., each governed by its own methodologies and presuppositions, but there is no over-arching, all-encompassing category of “knowledge as such” for epistemologists to investigate. Williams thinks that the whole skeptical problem relies on the theoretical error of thinking that there is something for skepticism to be about in the first place. In denying the intuitive nature of skepticism Williams claims, “The Humean condition and the human condition are not the same” (Williams 1996, 359).

⁵ I’ll discuss epistemological realism in more detail in chapter four, section 4.2.

Having laid out the basic positions on each side of the debate, it will help to clarify what the problem is and what is at stake. First of all, the claim that a theoretical problem in epistemology could be part of the human condition may seem as strange to some existentially inclined philosophers as it does to some analytic philosophers. For those interested in epistemology for more theoretical reasons, the notion that skepticism could have anything to do with the human condition may seem to sully the realm of pure theory with woolly-headed concerns about the meaning of life. For those philosophers who think the human condition is a matter of great existential concern, the idea that something as dry and arcane as skepticism, as opposed to, say, the problems of freedom or the existence of God, could have anything to do with something as fundamentally important as the human condition is likely to be rejected as a waste of time. This is not to say that *all* existentialists and analytic philosophers feel this way; in fact, it is when presented with a problem as seemingly deep and intuitive as skepticism that analytic philosophers tend toward existential moods (Russell⁶ and Stroud) and even existentialists may pause to correct what they see as theoretical errors (Heidegger⁷).

So, why *is* the question of skepticism's intuitiveness important? What's at stake? First, it is of interest in metaphilosophical reflections on epistemology: if skepticism is an inevitable problem, then the problem cannot simply be ignored or theorized away, at least in our epistemological endeavors. Second, if skepticism is both intuitive *and* insoluble, then there lies within human rationality an alarming lack of justification for many of our

⁶ In *Human Knowledge*, Russell claims, in a particularly Humean mode, "Skepticism, while logically impeccable, is psychologically impossible..." (Russell 1948, xi). In *A History of Western Philosophy*, Russell says that Hume "represents, in a certain sense, a dead end: in his direction, it is impossible to go further. To refute him has been, ever since he wrote, a favourite passtime among metaphysicians. For my part, I find none of their refutations convincing; nevertheless, I cannot but hope that something less sceptical than Hume's system may be discoverable" (Russell 1945, 659).

⁷ See section 43 of *Being and Time*, in which Heidegger attempts to diagnose external world skepticism as an inadequate understanding of Being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962, 244-256).

most basic beliefs, a lack most of us would find an existentially tragic contrast between how we would like to view our cognitive lives and where our philosophical reasoning leads us.

While some epistemologists have claimed to meet the challenge of skepticism head-on (from Descartes to G. E. Moore), I think the majority of contemporary epistemologists are right to find such answers philosophically unpersuasive. Instead, many philosophers have admitted that skepticism is insoluble, at least as the problem is stated, and have instead offered what Williams calls “therapeutic diagnoses” or “theoretical diagnoses.” I will say more about these ideas in the next section, but the basic idea is that, instead of trying to meet skeptical challenges on their own terms, philosophers should instead think deeply about the mistakes or problematic assumptions that lead us to pose skeptical problems in the first place. That is, philosophers must correctly diagnose the disease instead of exacerbating the symptoms. Needless to say, proponents of the intuitive thesis find such diagnoses unconvincing, largely because they often force us to give up seemingly correct notions such as the desirability of objectivity or the feeling that skeptical arguments are meaningful.

1.2 Some Western discussions of the intuitive nature of skepticism

The issue of the intuitive character of skeptical problems was first clearly articulated by Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. After a lengthy discussion of skepticism about whether reason or the senses yield knowledge, Hume says

This sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur'd, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, and sometimes may seem

entirely free from it. 'Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses, and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on these subjects, it always encreases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or in conformity to it. Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason I rely entirely upon them; and take it for granted, whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be perswaded there is both an external and internal world ... (*Treatise* 1.4.2).

There are two features I would like to point out about this passage. First, Hume expresses the opinion that skepticism is an entirely natural result of philosophical inquiry, and indeed, an unavoidable result of such inquiry. As he says later, "the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life" (*Treatise* 1.4.7). Second, the only way to avoid a paralyzing skepticism is through "carelessness and inattention," that is, one must simply relax and stop playing the game of philosophical justification, even if just for a few moments. As Hume famously says, "Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium ... I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends..." (*Treatise* 1.4.7). While skeptical conclusions and "philosophical melancholy" are the ineluctable result of serious philosophical thinking, nature and social interaction offer at least a temporary cure. Thus, the human condition is that skepticism is inevitable or intuitive *within* our philosophical reasoning, but this fact need not lead us to interminable angst about our epistemological situation.

After Hume, many discussions of skepticism have aimed at what Williams calls a “diagnosis,” either of the therapeutic or theoretical variety.⁸ Those in favor of a therapeutic diagnosis

argue that sceptical claims and arguments are defective in point of meaning. They think that the sceptic does not mean what he seems to mean, or even that he fails to mean anything at all. Clearly, we do not need to ‘answer’ the sceptic if he fails to ask a coherent question. (Williams 1996, xvi)

Therapeutic diagnoses seek to convince us that skeptical hypotheses are meaningless or at least cannot mean what we take them to mean. Hence, we would have no more reason to answer skeptical questions than to answer the question of where we can find the colorless green ideas sleeping furiously.

Alternatively, theoretical diagnoses hope to correct some theoretical error that causes us to ask skeptical questions in the first place. A theoretical diagnosis concedes that skeptical arguments make sense, but claims that they only get off the ground if we accept some contentious piece of theory; the purpose is “to redistribute the burden of theory, thereby depriving the sceptic of what would otherwise be an overwhelming dialectical advantage” (Williams 1996, xvii).

Although I cannot deal with every Western philosopher who has weighed in on skepticism, I will discuss a handful of major figures, using Williams’s framework as a convenient way to organize them. Furthermore, not every philosopher who has discussed skepticism has directly addressed the question of whether skepticism is intuitive or natural. In general, however, it seems that those offering therapeutic diagnoses are more

⁸ G. E. Moore did try to answer skepticism straightforwardly in “A Defense of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World” (Moore 1959, 32-59, 126-148).

likely to admit that skepticism is intuitive and those in favor of theoretical diagnoses most often reject the intuitive thesis.

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein offers a kind of therapeutic diagnosis in which statements such as “there is an external world” cannot be meaningfully doubted.⁹

Instead, such statements can be called “hinge propositions”:

... the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were hinges on which those turn. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *indeed* not doubted. ... If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (Wittgenstein 1969, Sec. 341-343)

The idea is that sentences such as “there is an external world” are not the kind of sentences that can be meaningfully entered into a language-game of doubting and knowledge-attribution. This is because “the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (Wittgenstein 1969, Sec. 115). Reminding oneself of how doubt and belief actually work is meant to show that skepticism is not a fully meaningful mode of doubting.¹⁰ Wittgenstein nonetheless seems to maintain that skeptical worries are a natural temptation lurking in language. Wittgenstein’s relation to skepticism is complex, but I would maintain that his position is that even if skepticism is not meaningful in the sense we think it is, there does seem to be something right about skepticism; thus, he provocatively states, “The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing” (Wittgenstein 1969, Sec. 166).

⁹ I think there is evidence that Wittgenstein did not think such propositions could be meaningfully *believed* either. “No one ever taught me that my hands don’t disappear when I am not paying attention to them. Nor can I be said to presuppose the truth of this proposition in my assertions, etc. (as if they rested on it)...” (Wittgenstein 1969, Sec. 153).

¹⁰ For a use of Wittgenstein for purposes of Williams’s theoretical diagnosis, see Williams 2004. For recent work on Wittgenstein and skepticism see McManus 2004 and McGinn 2008.

Rudolf Carnap, J. L. Austin, Stanley Cavell, and Hilary Putnam have also offered therapeutic diagnoses. For Carnap, both skeptical hypotheses and their denials run afoul of the principle of verification; hence, any discussion of skepticism is entirely meaningless and when it comes to realism and idealism, “the question of their truth or falsity cannot even be posed” (Carnap 1967, 332-334).¹¹ For Austin, worries about skepticism fail to appreciate the ordinary meanings of words such as “real” and “know” and illegitimately insert words with no meaning in ordinary language such as “sense-data” and “material object.” Thus, skepticism relies on simple mistakes about linguistic usage (Austin 1970; Austin 1962). Skepticism is *not* intuitive for Austin, since it is only philosophers under the spell of linguistic confusions who entertain skeptical worries. Cavell, on the other hand, remains more Wittgensteinian in his assertion that skeptical arguments do not mean what they are purported to mean, because epistemologists put forward a claim in “a non-claim context,” that is, a skeptical claim is not properly a claim at all, since such a claim “must be the investigation of a concrete claim if its procedure is to be coherent; it cannot be the investigation of a concrete claim if its conclusion is to be general” (Cavell 1979, 218-220). In other words, skeptical arguments cannot at the same time be general and involve a concrete claim: if they are general, they violate the Wittgensteinian notion that any proper claim must occur within the context of a specific language-game involving verifiable claims, but if skeptical arguments are concrete, verifiable claims embedded in a specific language-game, then they can’t be general arguments that apply to knowledge across contexts and language-games. For Putnam, the brain-in-a-vat scenario (a contemporary science fiction version of Descartes’s dream

¹¹ For a careful and thorough critique of Carnap on this point, see Stroud 1984, Ch. 5. I also remain unsure where to place Carnap in relation to the intuitive thesis. I suppose if metaphysical, unverifiable language arises naturally, then maybe he would accept that skepticism is intuitive in some sense.

scenario) is itself incoherent. Given Putnam's semantic externalist view that the contents of thoughts are determined by external relations such as causal connections to one's environment, such brains "cannot ... *refer* to what we can refer to ... they cannot think or say that they are brains in a vat" (Putnam 1981, 8). Thus, according to Putnam, if one were a brain in a vat, one couldn't think or believe that one is a brain in a vat. The content of such thoughts and beliefs would be electrical stimulations (or whatever actually plays a causal role in the thoughts and beliefs of envatted brains), but the content would not be actual brains and vats, which play a causal role in the thoughts and beliefs of non-envatted individuals.

While therapeutic diagnoses concentrate on a deficiency in meaning, theoretical diagnoses concentrate on a deficiency in theory. Kant, awakened from his dogmatic slumber, offered a kind of theoretical diagnosis via his "Copernican Revolution," replacing dogmatic metaphysical philosophy with his own transcendental philosophy. Although I would place Kant in the theoretical diagnosis camp, he does seem to accept that skeptical doubts are natural and cannot be solved, except of course by transcendental philosophy.¹² Dewey, in *The Quest for Certainty*, attributes skepticism to a mistaken "spectator theory of knowledge" (Dewey 1960, 23).¹³ Heidegger, writing about Kant's remark that a lack of a proof of the external world remains a "scandal of philosophy," retorted, "The 'scandal of philosophy' is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that such *proofs are expected and attempted again and again*" (Heidegger 1962, 249).

¹² The beginning of the A Preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason* contains a fairly clear statement that skeptical worries arise naturally: "Human reason has a peculiar fate in one kind of its cognitions: it is troubled by questions that it cannot dismiss, because they are posed to it by the nature of reason itself, but that it also cannot answer, because they surpass human reason's ability" (Kant 1996, A vii).

¹³ Dewey's theoretical diagnosis can be seen clearly in the following: "Theories which assume that the knowing subject, that mind or consciousness, have an inherent capacity to disclose reality ... are invitations to general philosophical doubt" (Dewey 1960, 193-4).

Heidegger wants to replace problematic Cartesian and Kantian theories of perception with an account of Dasein's Being-in-the-world, a framework in which skeptical worries are alleged not to arise.¹⁴ Rorty, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, adds a more historical version of a theoretical diagnosis. In criticizing a contemporary preoccupation with many of the same issues that preoccupied Descartes, Locke, and Kant, Rorty claims, "Skepticism and the principal genre of modern philosophy have a symbiotic relationship" (Rorty 1979, 114). Based on his historical interpretations, Rorty puts forward a theoretical diagnosis that states, "Any theory which views knowledge as accuracy of representation, and which holds that certainty can only be rationally had about representations, will make skepticism inevitable" (Rorty 1979, 113).¹⁵

In contemporary analytic epistemology, three common theoretical diagnoses are versions of epistemic externalism, contextualism, and denial of the closure principle.¹⁶ According to one form of epistemic externalism, Alvin Goldman's reliabilism, we might say that *if* one were a brain-in-a-vat (BIV), then one would not know anything, because

¹⁴ Heidegger's treatment of skepticism is in Section 43 of *Being and Time*. For my part, I find Heidegger's diagnosis of skepticism to be thoroughly unconvincing, largely because he attempts to transform an essentially *epistemological* problem of how we *know* the world into an *ontological* issue of how Dasein *has* a world. However, the question is not and never was about what exists, or even how we exist in the world or whether there is some unbridgeable gap between subject and object. It has always been about what we can know, and it seems to me that this question is far less theoretically loaded than Heidegger and many other philosophers suppose. My main reason for finding Heidegger's diagnosis unconvincing is that every aspect of being-in-the-world could be true in a dream world, computer simulation, hallucination, etc. You could, for all you know, have being-in-a-different-world-than-you-think. Of course, it is such de-epistemologizing and re-ontologizing that remains Heidegger's principal philosophical task in *Being and Time*. This simply doesn't work as a diagnosis of skepticism. For a more favorable interpretation of Heidegger's relation to epistemology, see Richardson 1986.

¹⁵ Rorty's diagnosis is to remove such problematic theoretical assumptions via his own diagnosis and those of his philosophical heroes, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. Once we are free from representationalism and its accompanying skepticism, we are free to engage in hermeneutic or edifying philosophy (Rorty 1979, 315-395). I will respond to Rorty's diagnosis in chapter two, section 2.7, where I argue that Vasubandhu's theory of perception is much like the sort of representationalism that Rorty denounces but Vasubandhu's theory did not lead to skepticism (at least not directly).

¹⁶ See DeRose 1995 for a nice discussion of contextualism and closure in regard to skeptical arguments and DeRose and Warfield 1999 for an anthology of contemporary work in the three areas I discuss here as well as semantic externalism, relevant alternatives, and responses that are more concessive to skepticism.

the belief that one is not a BIV would not be caused by a reliable cognitive process. On the other hand, if one is *not* a BIV, then one does know things, because there exists a proper causal relationship between the belief that one is not a BIV and a reliable belief-forming process. Thus, externalists claim that it is *possible* that we do have knowledge, even if we cannot meet internalist criteria such as knowing that we know or having first-person access to justification; the causal relations perform all that is required for knowledge.¹⁷ Timothy Williamson gives another externalist reply. His diagnosis challenges the Cartesian distinction between clear, luminous self-knowledge and a lack of clarity in knowledge about the world: "... sceptical arguments may go wrong by assuming too *much* knowledge; by sacrificing something in self-knowledge to the sceptic, we stand to gain far more in knowledge of the world" (Williamson 2000, 164). For Williamson, skeptical scenarios are alleged to be cases in which we have the same evidence whether we really have knowledge of the external world or not.¹⁸ He combines externalism about our knowledge of the world with a weakening of knowledge of our internal states via his anti-luminosity arguments that we are not always in a position to know when a mental state obtains (Williamson 2000, Ch. 4). By doing so, Williamson thinks skepticism will be less troubling; instead of contrasting our firm grasp on internal knowledge with a weak grasp on external knowledge, Williamson's view is that we may in fact have different evidence in cases in which knowledge is genuine and cases in which it is merely apparent, which applies equally to knowledge of internal and external matters. Diagnoses such as Williamson's may not solve the problem of skepticism

¹⁷ See Goldman 1985 for a basic statement of reliabilism and Williams 1996, Ch. 8 for a detailed discussion of both externalism and closure-denial with regard to skepticism.

¹⁸ Williamson makes a similar point against forms of skepticism in which the methods or rules are alleged to be the same instead of evidence (Williamson 2000, 181-183).

entirely, but they might help epistemologists worry less about it in their theoretical endeavors.

The most common type of contextualism, semantic contextualism, claims that the truth conditions of ascriptions of knowledge, such as “S knows that P”, are context sensitive. Stewart Cohen explains: “the truth value of sentences containing the words ‘know’ and its cognates will depend on contextually determined standards” and these standards are the “contexts of ascription” which “vary depending on things like the purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions, etc., of the speakers who utter these sentences” (Cohen 2000, 94). For semantic contextualism, truth conditions can vary according to the context of the speakers who are ascribing knowledge. For example, “Sally knows that she has hands” is true in the normal contexts, such as standing in front of a classroom building, but false in specifically epistemological contexts, such as when one enters an epistemology classroom. Contextualism is seen as a way to make sense of skepticism (thus denying therapeutic diagnoses) without letting it have much impact in regular life.

Lastly, some contemporary epistemologists have denied one of the key assumptions of skeptical arguments: the closure principle, or the principle that knowledge is closed under known logical entailment. The closure principle states: “If S knows that p and S knows that p entails q, then S, if S competently draws the relevant inference, knows that q.” Sceptically minded epistemologists exploit this for arguments from ignorance: “I do *not* know I’m not a brain in a vat. If I do not know I’m not a BIV, then I do not know I have hands. Therefore, I do not know I have hands.” Some philosophers have claimed that the mistake in skeptical arguments is the assumption that the closure

principle always holds. Fred Dretske, for example, gives what he takes to be counter-examples to this assumption (Dretske 1999). He claims to show that epistemic operators such as “I know...” are only semi-penetrating operators. Epistemic operators do not hold in all their entailments. Therefore, the second premise in the above skeptical argument is abandoned, and it is the case that even if I do not know I am not a BIV, I may nonetheless know that I have hands.¹⁹

Of course, some continue to doubt whether any of the aforementioned diagnoses are compelling. The New Humeans remind us that diagnostic replies to skepticism are often purchased for a price that many of us are unwilling to pay. For instance, therapeutic diagnoses are often more difficult to understand than the skeptical hypotheses they seek to dissolve; skeptical hypotheses are immediately compelling in a way that intricate discussions of ordinary language, claim contexts, or theories of reference are not. Theoretical diagnoses often force us to give up traditional ideals of objectivity or other principles that would seem to be intuitively correct.²⁰ Stroud says,

We find ourselves with questions about knowledge that lead either to an unsatisfactory sceptical conclusion or to this or that ‘theory’ of knowledge which on reflection turns out to offer no more genuine satisfaction than the original sceptical conclusion it was meant to avoid. (Stroud 1984, 168)²¹

This may indicate, as Peter Unger claims, “of all the reasons why scepticism may be impossible to refute, one stands out as the simplest: scepticism isn’t wrong, it’s right” (Unger 1975, 2). Or it could indicate that there is more work to be done and that doing

¹⁹ Other proponents of closure-denial include Nozick 1981 (who introduces the concept of “epistemic sensitivity”) and Becker 2007, 113-128 (who argues that closure-denial is more plausible than contextualism).

²⁰ See Williams 1996, Ch. 6 for a criticism of the idea that the desire for objectivity or various forms of realism are the sources of skepticism, an idea adopted in various ways by Davidson, Dummett, and Putnam.

²¹ Stroud’s penetrating discussions of Kant, Carnap and Quine (chapters four, five and six respectively) are particularly insightful in identifying the problems with their attempts at diagnosis.

this work will yield valuable epistemological insights. As John Greco says, “It was part of my methodology, in fact, to *assume* that skepticism is false, and that skeptical arguments go wrong somewhere. The trick was to say where, and to learn the philosophical lesson contained therein” (Greco 2000, *xiii*). This is not the place to argue for or against skepticism (although I will revisit some of these issues in later chapters); however, I think the preceding section has shown that diagnosing skepticism is a tricky business indeed.

1.3 Looking to classical Indian epistemology: Conducting an experiment in cross-cultural philosophy

But who is right? Are epistemologists forever condemned to the Sisyphean task of “answering the skeptic”? It is here that I think the study of non-Western philosophical traditions can help. I find it quite provincially problematic to claim to speak about intuitiveness or “the human condition” without even glancing at non-Western philosophical traditions. Neither can we simply assume an answer based on general metaphilosophical theories, as I think Rorty and others tend to do in their flat denial of there being any ahistorical or trans-cultural philosophical problems. Nor should we take the route that a problem really is intuitive just because it seems to be to us, as Stroud and others tend to do.

Instead, I suggest that the best way to come toward an answer to this question is the most obvious: we must *look and see*. Hence, I think of my attempt as an experiment in cross-cultural philosophy. I mean “experiment” in a fairly straightforward sense.²² I

²² For experiments in an even more straightforward sense, see Nichols, Stich and Weinberg 2003, who conducted cross-cultural empirical surveys of people concerning their intuitions about standard

propose to test the hypothesis of the intuitive character of skepticism via the following test implication: If the problem of skepticism is an inevitable, intuitive part of the human condition, one would expect it to arise in any sufficiently sophisticated tradition of epistemology. Classical Indian philosophy certainly developed a sophisticated tradition of epistemology. Therefore, if the problem of skepticism is an inevitable part of the human condition, one would expect that this problem would be an inevitable part of the human condition as much for classical Indian epistemologists as it has been for Western epistemologists since Descartes. Skeptical issues in Indian philosophy may not be exactly the same as those in the West, but if the intuitive thesis is correct, they should arise in some form. As Stroud says, "... whatever we seek in philosophy, or whatever leads us to ask philosophical questions at all, must be something pretty deep in human nature, and ... what leads us to ask just the questions we do in the particular ways we now ask them must be pretty deep in our tradition" (Stroud 1984, x). According to the intuitive thesis, the specific form of our questions may be set by our local traditions, but the impulse to ask such questions is part of human nature.

Of course, merely looking into one other tradition will not solve the matter either. Rather, I see my project as constituting one premise in an inductive argument intended to answer the question of whether skepticism is an intuitive problem. Like scientific hypotheses, the hypothesis of skepticism's intuitiveness can never be fully confirmed or confuted. Nevertheless, I hope to offer some support for one answer or the other.

epistemological fare such as Gettier cases, painted mules, and brains in vats. Nichols et al. take a dim view of whether the intuitions of professional philosophers are shared across cultures and socio-economic status. My project, however, has less to do with the metaphilosophical issue of how intuitions should be used and more to do with whether certain problems inevitably arise within philosophical traditions.

I began with the contemporary debate about whether the consideration of skepticism as a philosophical issue is an inevitable part of the human condition, with Stroud in the affirmative and Williams in the negative.²³ Through my inquiry into Indian skepticism I will test the hypothesis of the inevitability of skepticism as an epistemological issue. If we find no tendency to address skepticism in a philosophical tradition as sophisticated as that of classical India, then this lends support for Williams. If we *do* find that skepticism was an epistemological issue in classical India, then Stroud's positive assertion gains support.

While this is the beginning of my project, it will not be the end. I suspect that the so-called Indian skeptics, Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi in particular, are not skeptics in any straightforward Cartesian manner. They do not simply deny that we know anything about the external world on the basis of our perfectly innocent conceptions of knowledge. When it comes to the topic of knowledge, one thing that these skeptics do is to raise the question of whether our very conceptions of knowledge – or at least those of philosophers – are ultimately coherent. In the sense that they are primarily engaged in a critique of other philosophers, rather than knowledge-claims as such, their closest Western counterparts are the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics. In chapter two, section 2.8, I will give more details about the variety of skepticism I call metaphilosophical skepticism, which includes Pyrrhonism as well as Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi. I will also elaborate on my

²³ Note that there is a difference between claiming that skeptical *conclusions* are an inevitable part of the human condition and claiming that skepticism as a philosophical issue in epistemology is an inevitable part of the human condition. In the first case, one might expect to find many actual skeptics in sophisticated traditions of epistemology, which is not the case in either Western or Indian philosophy. I mean to investigate the second case, that is, whether there is a human tendency to entertain external world skepticism as a philosophical issue provided one engages in epistemological inquiry long enough. In the second case, there may be few, if any, actual skeptics who are moved to accept the conclusions of skeptical arguments, although there would be a strong human tendency to take skepticism seriously as an issue in epistemology.

definition of this type of skepticism as an attitude of sustained doubt, based on self-reflexive philosophical arguments, about the possibility of achieving the aims of philosophy or the desirability of philosophical pursuits, where “philosophy” typically refers to characterizations of philosophical beliefs, knowledge-claims, or attitudes as presented by other philosophers.

For now it will suffice to distinguish external-world skepticism from metaphilosophical skepticism in two ways. First, in the history of Western philosophy the clearest example of what I am calling metaphilosophical skepticism is Pyrrhonism, which Sextus Empiricus tells us is a method of achieving tranquility (*ataraxia*) by means of suspending judgment about philosophical issues. Pyrrhonism is a kind of intellectual therapy for those whose mental tranquility is disrupted by philosophical speculation. Whereas Pyrrhonian skeptics react to philosophical disputes by saying, “Suspend judgment,” representatives of the other major branch of Hellenistic skepticism, Academic skeptics, are generally thought to make the claim, “Knowledge is impossible” (although at least one Academic, Carneades, may have had a more nuanced approach in simply claiming that he had an impression that knowledge is impossible). In other words, Pyrrhonian skeptics don’t claim either that knowledge is or is not possible, while Academics claim that knowledge is impossible. Sextus says that Academic skeptics “have asserted that things cannot be apprehended” while Pyrrhonian skeptics “are still investigating” (PH 1.3); elsewhere he says, “we [Pyrrhonian skeptics] say that appearances are equal in convincingness and lack of convincingness (so far as the argument goes), while they [Academic skeptics] say that some are plausible and others implausible” (PH 1.227). Historically, the form of external-world skepticism popularized

by Descartes is a localized version of Academic skepticism, since the conclusion of his skeptical arguments is that we do not have knowledge of the external world, although we may have other kinds of knowledge. If presented with external world skepticism, Pyrrhonian skeptics would not react by proposing an alternative answer concerning the status of our knowledge of the external world; rather, they would reject the act of philosophizing in which Academic skeptics are engaged and refuse to assert any answer at all – either affirmative or negative – concerning the question of our knowledge of the external world. As I will argue in chapters three and four, Nāgārjuna and Jayarāsi, like Pyrrhonian skeptics, are trying to provide a kind of intellectual therapy for those distressed by philosophical activities, but they are not, like Academic skeptics, making a claim about the possibility of knowledge.

A second way to distinguish external-world skepticism from metaphilosophical skepticism is that external-world skepticism is a first order claim about the possibility of knowledge in a certain domain (the external world), while metaphilosophical skepticism is a higher order critique of the kinds of activities in which philosophers tend to engage. The problem of external-world skepticism encourages reflection on whether we really know anything about the external world, but reflection on the issues surrounding metaphilosophical skepticism might encourage us to question the whole activity of thinking about knowledge or other topics in the ways in which philosophers tend to do.

Whether Cartesian, external-world skepticism is an inevitable problem I remain ultimately unsure. My results concerning the Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu in chapter two are ambiguous: while something very much like a concern for external-world skepticism seems to be present, it is far from clear that Vasubandhu or other Indian

philosophers viewed it in quite the same way as their Western counterparts did. However, a deeper, more pervasive concern with metaphilosophical skepticism may be nearly inevitable in philosophical traditions. And this is at least as interesting, if not more, than my original question. Just as many scientific experiments yield unexpected data, so might my cross-cultural philosophical experiment yield unexpected results.

1.4 On blending historical/interpretive and problem-centered approaches

Cross-cultural philosophy, which I define as “the incorporation of philosophical traditions from multiple cultures into one’s philosophical practice,”²⁴ is generally conducted in one of two ways. On one hand, there is the problem-centered approach, in which philosophers focus on a philosophical problem and investigate ways in which this problem has been addressed in more than one philosophical tradition. On the other hand, there is the historical/interpretive approach in which scholars attempt to offer interpretations of texts in their historical and intellectual context.

I will offer something of a blend these two approaches. Specifically, I hope to use my particular interpretations of Indian skeptics to come toward solutions to the philosophical problem of the intuitive nature of skepticism. By doing so, I hope to show that scholars engaged in cross-cultural philosophy need not choose one approach at the expense of the other. Attention to textual exegesis need not rule out philosophical speculation, and philosophical problem solving need not rule out a historically nuanced interpretation. In fact, I would claim that it is not possible to engage in either approach without the other, but that these approaches are more a matter of emphasis. My emphasis

²⁴ While I claim this definition as my own, I did not invent the term “cross-cultural philosophy.” It is explicitly used in Dean 1995, Shilibrack 2000, and Garfield 2002, 230.

will change in different parts of this project; through most of chapters two, three, and four I will emphasize my role as an interpreter, while in chapter five I will emphasize my role of an independent philosopher.

1.5 Preview of the upcoming chapters

In chapter two I will consider whether the dream arguments in Vasubandhu's *Vimśikārikā* (*Twenty Verses*) constitute a version of external-world skepticism, using the debate between two interpretations of this text – idealist and phenomenalist – to frame the issue. While Vasubandhu is often seen as an idealist, I support a phenomenalist interpretation in which the conclusion is that what is immediately present to the mind are appearances, cognitions, or sense data. Hence, we should suspend judgment on the question of the external world, and there is a standing invitation to skepticism 1,200 years before Descartes. However informative this result may be, it offers only partial support for the intuitive thesis: while Vasubandhu offers an *invitation* to seriously consider skeptical issues, it is far from clear that either Vasubandhu or his fellow Indian philosophers *accepted* this invitation with anything resembling the enthusiasm of the post-Cartesian West.

Although these results are ambiguous with regard to the intuitive thesis, I think there surely are skeptics in Indian philosophy as many contemporary scholars argue (Matilal 1986, Garfield 2002, Hayes 1988a), and that these skeptics raised issues that their non-skeptical counterparts seriously considered. I suspect that many Indian skeptics, Nāgārjuna (c. 200 CE) and Jayarāśi (c. 800 CE) in particular, are not straightforward skeptics about the external world. They do not simply deny that we

know anything about the external world; they are denying the coherence of concepts of what knowledge is. This is a version of metaphilosophical skepticism, or a kind of skepticism about philosophy. My aim in chapters three and four is to offer interpretations of Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophers such as Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti and of the Cārvāka Jayarāśi, arguing that such philosophers are best read as metaphilosophical skeptics and that these issues were also matters of concern for their non-skeptical counterparts. For Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, this interpretation is a way to make sense of both their positive arguments for emptiness and their injunctions against holding any view whatsoever. For Jayarāśi, this interpretation can explain how and why a member of (or sympathizer with) the irreligious Cārvāka school would offer such thoroughly destructive critiques of epistemological theory in general.

Having given these interpretations, I will return to the problem-centered approach and the question of the intuitive nature of skeptical problems. Although the issue of external-world skepticism did not develop in Indian philosophy in quite the same way it developed in Western philosophy, I will argue for my overall thesis that another kind of skeptical concern, the issue of metaphilosophical skepticism, does seem to be nearly inevitable in many philosophical traditions. This form of skeptical worry seems to arise whenever particular elements are present in a philosophical tradition. This is what I call the dependent origination of metaphilosophical skepticism. The basic idea is that the activity of giving philosophical justifications can be seen as a type or structure of human behavior called a meme, which is a unit of cultural replication. If the meme of offering philosophical justification is pushed far enough, it leads us to what Graham Priest calls the limits of thought due to the combination of the totality of justifying everything in a

particular domain and the reflexivity of having to justify the justifications themselves. This situation gives rise to a host of philosophical mysteries that, following Colin McGinn, we seem to be unable to solve in virtue of our nature as human beings. The issue of metaphilosophical skepticism has arisen in Indian, Western, and other traditions when individual philosophers noticed and exploited these features in various ways, or so I will claim. I will also argue for a mitigated version of metaphilosophical skepticism that encourages modesty in our philosophical pursuits, tempering some of our more unreasonable intellectual aspirations. As I see it, this is the lesson to be learned from skeptics such as Nāgārjuna and Jayarāsi.

Instead of answering the original question concerning the intuitive nature of skeptical issues directly, the study of skepticism in classical Indian philosophy ought to incite us to reframe the debate, to question what philosophical skepticism is, has been, and could be. The study of Indian philosophy becomes, rather than passive data answering our questions, an active partner in dialogue, encouraging us to reconsider our own preconceptions. And, even if metaphilosophical skepticism ought to engender modesty in our philosophical aspirations, the reconsideration of our preconceptions is a suitable goal for cross-cultural philosophy.

1.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide the necessary background needed to set up what I am calling an experiment in cross-cultural philosophy. I did so by setting up the debate between proponents of the intuitive thesis, such as Barry Stroud, and proponents of various forms of philosophical diagnoses, such as Michael Williams. After

a brief tour of various discussions of the intuitive nature of the problem of skepticism in Western philosophy, I suggested that we ought to look to other traditions as a way to solve the dispute, Indian philosophy in particular. This approach combines both the historical/interpretative and problem-centered approaches to cross-cultural philosophy, and I gave a preview of how exactly I will combine these approaches in the chapters to come to argue for my overall thesis. In the next chapter, I will look to Vasubandhu to show what a fourth- or fifth-century Buddhist philosopher has to teach us about contemporary epistemology.

Chapter Two

External-World Skepticism and Indian Philosophy: The Case of Vasubandhu

“Perceptual cognition is just as in a dream...”
- Vasubandhu, *Vimśikārikā* 16

In the previous chapter I set up what I called an experiment in cross-cultural philosophy. In this chapter I will carry out that experiment. My test case will be the Indian Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu, in particular his *Vimśikārikā* (*Twenty Verses*).¹ Recall that the test implication of my experiment is as follows: if a concern about skepticism is an intuitive part of the human condition, then it ought to arise in any sufficiently-sophisticated tradition of epistemology. Classical Indian philosophy developed a sophisticated epistemological tradition, so if we find concerns about skepticism there, Stroud’s intuitive thesis gains inductive support, and it’s likely that skeptical issues really are a part of the human condition. If there is nothing like a concern about skeptical issues in classical India, then the thesis of Williams and others that skepticism is not an intuitive problem gains support, and it’s more likely that we are not after all stuck in the Humean condition.

While Vasubandhu is an important figure in classical India, I am concentrating on him not simply due to his influence, but due to the fact that he set forth arguments that are eerily reminiscent of Descartes’s dream argument. I am in no way claiming that Vasubandhu is the only possible source of concern about external-world skepticism in Indian philosophy. The Advaita Vedānta philosopher Gauḍapāda, for instance, also

¹ This text is often called *Vimśatikā*, but recent scholarship suggests that the original name of the text is *Vimśikā* (Kano 2008, 345, 350; Taber 2010, 280 n 3).

makes frequent use of dreams.² I have chosen to concentrate on Vasubandhu because his dream arguments bear the greatest similarity to those found in the Western tradition. If a concern about external-world skepticism is to be found in classical India, Vasubandhu's *Viṃśikākārikā* is – as far as I can tell – the best place to look.

I am also not discounting that there may be concerns about other forms of skepticism in classical Indian philosophy. For instance, something very much like the problem of other minds seems to be what's at stake in Dharmakīrti's *Saṅtānāntarasiddhi* and Ratnakīrti's *Saṅtānāntaradūṣaṇa*.³ As I will discuss in the next chapter, some scholars see a precursor to Hume's skepticism about causation in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhymakakārikā*; another Humean chord was perhaps struck by Cārvāka philosophers who doubted the validity of inference in general, at least insofar as it goes beyond experience.⁴ A more general skeptical attack on the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) is found in the *Nyāyasūtra*, where Gautama considers the following objections: that the means of knowledge cannot be established in the "three times" of the past, present, or future (NS 2.1.8-11), that attempts to establish the means of knowledge lead to an infinite regress (NS 2.1.17), and that if we allow a means of knowledge to be unestablished by another means of knowledge, we don't need the means of knowledge in the first place – why not say that all knowledge is similarly unestablished? (NS 2.1.18).

² See Gauḍapāda's *Āgamaśāstra* (an Advaita Vedānta text that was probably influenced by Buddhist schools), especially verses such as 2.1-7, 2.9-10, 2.31, 3.10, 3.29, 4.32-39. For more on Gauḍapāda and his relation to Vasubandhu, see Kaplan 1992 and King 1995, Ch. 5. Kaplan and King claim that Gauḍapāda's status as an idealist is as open to question as Vasubandhu's, but I suspect the evidence for Gauḍapādan idealism is somewhat clearer. After explicitly declaring that objects grasped by the mind both internally and externally do not exist (ĀŚ 2.10), Gauḍapāda says that it is the fixed opinion of Vedānta that the *ātman* imagines itself and cognizes various things "by its own illusion" (*svamāyayā*) (ĀŚ 2.12).

³ English translations of these texts are in Wood 1991, Appendices 2 and 4. A recent thorough work on Dharmakīrti is Dunne 2004; for a good introduction to Ratnakīrti, see McDermott 1969, 1-6.

⁴ One recent Nāgārjuna-Hume comparison can be found in Garfield 1995, 107, 114 and 2002, Ch. 1. I will discuss such comparisons in chapter three, section 3.5. I will discuss Cārvāka in more detail in chapter four, section 4.1.

Issues similar to those found in NS 2.1.17-18 are raised in Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, as I will discuss in some detail in chapter three (section 3.6).⁵ I'll also have more to say about the general issue of skepticism in Indian philosophy in section 2.1. However, because external-world skepticism is the focus of the debate concerning the intuitive thesis and because it has been the specific form of skepticism emphasized in contemporary epistemology, this chapter will concentrate on external-world skepticism, in particular whether a concern about external-world skepticism can be found in Vasubandhu's *Viṃśikārikā*.

My plan for this chapter is to begin with some general reasons to think that skeptical issues have been topics of serious concern for classical Indian philosophers, a fact that some scholars have doubted. I will then turn to Vasubandhu to investigate the question of whether his dream arguments constitute a genuine concern about external-world skepticism, framing this question around the interpretive debate about whether his position is best described as phenomenalism or idealism. After presenting the evidence for each interpretation, I will argue for the thesis of this chapter that there are good reasons to read Vasubandhu's *Viṃśikārikā* as an argument for phenomenalism according to which the direct objects of perception are cognitions (*vijñapti*) rather than external objects; furthermore, even if Vasubandhu was in fact an idealist, given what his arguments actually support, he *should have been* a phenomenalist. I will also make clear why Vasubandhu didn't take a representational or indirect realist route according to which we infer the existence of external objects even though we are only directly aware of subjective mental states. While I will argue that phenomenalism (at least in its

⁵ Nāgārjuna famously applies a version of the "three times" argument to motion in MMK, chapter two.

Vasubandhuan flavor) is close to raising a skeptical issue, Vasubandhu's phenomenism is not a full-fledged example of a skeptical problem; however, it does constitute something of an invitation to skeptical concerns thereby giving partial support for the intuitive thesis. Contrary to what philosophers such as Williams might predict, whether Vasubandhu is an idealist or a phenomenist, he shows that what M. F. Burnyeat calls the "realist assumption" was explicitly called into question in classical India (I'll say more about this in section 2.7). However, if Stroud's position implies that external-world skepticism should be a pervasive concern in any epistemological tradition, then Stroud isn't right, either, since Vasubandhu's phenomenism falls short of a full-fledged concern for external-world skepticism. While the results of my experiment aren't entirely clear in that there is no complete confirmation or disconfirmation of the intuitive thesis, I think my results show that the debate over the intuitive thesis is more complex than is usually acknowledged. One added complexity is that there is another kind of skepticism that I think *is* quite clearly exemplified in classical Indian philosophy, both in terms of actual skeptics and non-skeptics who worried about it. I call this metaphilosophical skepticism, which I will contrast with epistemological skepticism. This expansion of our skeptical vocabulary will make way for the interpretations of Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi that I offer in chapters three and four. I will return to the question of the intuitive nature of skeptical concerns in chapter five.

2.1 Skeptical issues in Indian philosophy?

Philosophical skepticism has been a central issue in Western philosophy, but what about skepticism in Indian philosophy? Indian philosophers obviously deny some

specific knowledge claims (especially those of other schools), but some scholars have doubted that the problem of philosophical skepticism was influential in classical Indian philosophy. John Koller, for example, claims, “Skepticism has not been warmly received by Indian philosophers over the ages” (Koller 1977, 155). Although there have been some skeptics (Koller points to Jayarāṣi and several quotes from the Vedas⁶), he claims that such skeptical doubts have not had much influence on the types of issues considered in classical India. Koller speculates that the Indian emphasis on self-knowledge has helped Indian philosophers avoid worries about excessive skeptical doubts (Koller 1977, 163). Dipanikar Chatterjee largely agrees with Koller and goes even further to claim, “... the Indian philosophical tradition lacks a thorough system of skepticism” (Chatterjee 1977, 195). Chatterjee explains that even the heterodox schools (Cārvāka, Jain, Buddhist) did not deny that knowledge was *possible* in an epistemological sense (Chatterjee 1977, 198). For the Cārvāka position, he relies entirely on the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, nor does he mention Nāgārjuna or Śrī Harṣa, both of whom seem to deny (at least in some contexts) that any means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) can be established.⁷

⁶ For instance, he suggests that *R̥g Veda* 8.89, 9.112, and especially 10.129 could be read as expressions of skeptical doubt (Koller 1977, 159-161).

⁷ I will discuss skeptical interpretations of Nāgārjuna in detail in the next chapter. Śrī Harṣa’s situation in the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* is complex and the subject of some debate. Phyllis Granoff tends to emphasize Śrī Harṣa’s purely critical tendencies in his refutations of philosophical doctrines such that he “never independently proves anything at all” (Granoff 1978, 54). She notes his rejection of all definitions of *pramāṇas*, his refutation of metaphysical realism in Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Jainism and his arguments against the notion of conventional reality (*saṃvṛttisattva*) Buddhism and Vedānta (Granoff 1978, 3, 54-56). Stephen Phillips disagrees with her interpretation and interprets Śrī Harṣa as having a “positive program”: “Śrīharṣa is an Advaitin, proffering considerations that urge acceptance of the Advaita view. Some of his refutations – particularly in the first portion of his text – may be read as indirect proofs and thus be themselves positive argumentation bolstering planks of the Advaita stance” (Phillips 1995, 77). Phillips notes that Śrī Harṣa provisionally accepts scripture (*śruti*) as a *pramāṇa* (although even scripture is eventually sublated by “supreme mystical awareness”) and interprets all of his negative arguments as offering support for a positive ontological argument with the Advaita conclusion that “Brahman is to be accepted” (Phillips 1995, 82-83).

Many scholars disagree with Koller and Chatterjee. Some suggest that skepticism was a philosophical preoccupation of classical Indian philosophers, and others have shown that there were in fact philosophical skeptics in classical India. Karl Potter has been so bold as to state, “It is the business of speculative philosophy in India to combat skepticism and fatalism...” (Potter 1977, 50). While Potter is not always clear on the distinction between mere doubt and epistemological skepticism, he sees Indian philosophers as engaged in the defense of liberation (*mokṣa*) and its possibility from all doubts, both of the everyday and epistemological varieties. B. K. Matilal has remarked that skepticism has “formed an important part of philosophic activity in almost all ages everywhere” (Matilal 2002, 73).

Early Buddhism contains several references to thinkers that seem to express philosophical skepticism.⁸ Jayatilleke has suggested that such skeptics were even influential in the development of Early Buddhism (Jayatilleke 1963, Ch. 3). Richard Hayes has identified a kind of skepticism within the Buddhist tradition from the Nikāyas up until at least Dignāga; Hayes calls this “skeptical rationalism ... according to which there is no knowledge aside from that which meets the test of logical consistency, and moreover very few of our beliefs meet this test” (Hayes 1988a, 41). Hayes offers favorable comparisons between the Buddha and Pyrrho as well as some of Nāgārjuna’s statements and the Pyrrhonian ideal of suspension of judgment (Hayes 1988a, 51-62). Hayes reads Dignāga as an inheritor and innovator within the tradition of skeptical rationalism such that “as a skeptic his main interest was not to find a way to increase our knowledge but rather to find a way to subtract from our opinions” (Hayes 1988a, 111).

⁸ For instance, Sañjaya Bellatthaputta embraces a skeptical position in the *Samaññaphala Sutta*, DN 2.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, one common interpretation of Nāgārjuna is as a philosophical skeptic of some kind as, for example, Hayes, Garfield, and Matilal have argued (Hayes 1988a, 52-62, Garfield 2002, Matilal 2002, 77, Matilal 1986, 46-68). Matilal discusses Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrī Harṣa as three major examples of skepticism in Indian philosophy, since all three rely explicitly on *vitaṇḍā* or *prasaṅga* forms of argument in which no positive thesis is put forward (Matilal 2002, 74, 76). Eli Franco refers to Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrī Harṣa as “the three pillars on which Indian scepticism rests” (Franco 1994, 13).

By briefly considering the work of the scholars discussed here, I hope to have supported the suggestion that forms of philosophical skepticism motivated Indian philosophers and that there were in fact philosophical skeptics of various kinds in classical India. Next I will turn to the question of how Vasubandhu might add to our understanding of the place of skeptical concerns in classical India.

2.2 Vasubandhu and arguments from ignorance

Vasubandhu, who probably lived in the fourth or fifth centuries CE⁹, is without a doubt one of the most influential figures in Indian Buddhist philosophy and has continued to influence Buddhist intellectuals in Tibet, East Asia and – more recently – in the West up until the present day. There are many somewhat fanciful stories of his life, but it seems likely that Vasubandhu was a famous intellectual in his own day given that he

⁹ The dates of Vasubandhu’s lifetime are, like the dates of most classical Indian philosophers, quite imprecise. Anacker gives probable dates of 316-396 CE (Anacker 2005, 10). Less precise dates are given as “c. 360 C.E.” (Arnold 2005, 13) and “c. 400” (Matilal 1986, *xiv*). Frauwallner, who argues that there were two Vasubandhus, gives dates of 320 – 380 for the older author of the Yogācāra texts and 400-480 for the younger author of the *Abhidharmakośa* (Frauwallner 1951, 46, 32). Much of the controversy surrounding Vasubandhu’s date stems from differing dates given by later Buddhist philosophers such as Paramārtha and Kumārajīva. Discussions of this controversy can be found in Haldar 1975, 14-15, Kochumuttom 2008, *xi-xiii*, and Frauwallner 1951.

authored influential texts and was renowned for his skills in the tradition of public philosophical debate.¹⁰ He is the author of what many today still consider the best compendium of Abhidharma philosophy, the *Abhidharmakośa* and its accompanying commentary (*bhāṣya*). According to tradition, Vasubandhu wrote the verses from the perspective of the Sarvāstivāda branch of Abhidharma and the commentary from the point of view of the opposing Sautrāntika branch, thus angering his Sarvāstivāda teachers.¹¹ Just to stir things up even more he is said to have been converted to Mahāyāna by his brother (some say half-brother) Asaṅga, after which the brothers either founded or systematized the Yogācāra school, one of the two main philosophical schools of Indian Mahāyāna (the other being Madhyamaka).¹² Vasubandhu wrote commentaries on Mahāyāna texts as well as several independent treatises, including the *Viṃśikākārikā*, to which I will turn shortly. Some scholars think there is evidence that all of these achievements do not belong to one person and have posited the existence of two separate Vasubandhus, one fourth-century Yogācāra and another fifth-century Ābhidharmika (although this view is now in the minority).¹³ In any case, it is far beyond my purposes

¹⁰ A very readable summary of stories of Vasubandhu's life from Tibetan and Chinese sources can be found in Anacker 2005, 7-28. More concise summaries are Kritzer 2005, *xxii-xxvi* and Gold 2011, Section 1.

¹¹ While Sautrāntika and Dārṣṭāntika are often used synonymously, Kritzer argues that Vasubandhu did not consider these terms to refer to the same group, since Vasubandhu criticizes Dārṣṭāntika and accepts a Sautrāntika position that Kritzer claims was already moving toward Yogācāra (Kritzer 2005, *xxvi-xxx*). See Goodman 2004 for an interesting and plausible comparison of Vasubandhu's characterization of *dharmas* (the fundamental units of reality according to Vasubandhu in the AK) and the contemporary metaphysical notion of tropes.

¹² For useful general introductions to Yogācāra, see Gethin 1998, 244-250, Williams 1989, Ch. 4, and Griffiths 1986, 76-84.

¹³ The *locus classicus* for the "two Vasubandhu" theory is Frauwallner 1951. Frauwallner considers a wide variety of evidence from the later tradition and concludes that the existence of two different dates indicates the existence of two different individuals named Vasubandhu. For more on subsequent debates on Frauwallner's thesis, see Kritzer 2005, *xxiv-xxvi*, Kaplan 1992, 195, Griffiths 1986, 164-165 and Kochumuttom 2008, *xii-xiv*. I find it metaphysically humorous that scholars would spend so much time worrying about whether a Buddhist is one or two people since most Buddhists are committed to a metaphysics of persons according to which even if Vasubandhu were "one person" conventionally, he

here to establish the historical details of Vasubandhu’s life or to resolve the philological issues surrounding his authorship. As far as I am concerned here, “Vasubandhu” designates the author of the *Viṃśikākārikā* who lived sometime between 300 and 500 CE and was perhaps also the author of the *Abhidharmakośa*.

The *Viṃśikākārikā* (*Twenty Verses*) is one of Vasubandhu’s Yogācāra treatises and is often taken as one of the foundational texts of that school. It contains arguments purporting to show that if we allow for dream-cognitions without direct, external objects, we should allow *all* cognitions to be without direct, external objects. The thesis of the text is set forth in the first verse: “**This [world] is just cognition-only, because of the appearance of non-existent objects**” (*Viṃś* 1ab).¹⁴ As we’ll see, there is quite a bit of controversy about the meaning of the thesis or conclusion of the argument (i.e., “This [world] is just cognition-only”), but for now I’ll concentrate on the reasons given in favor of this conclusion.¹⁵

In verse two, Vasubandhu entertains an objection¹⁶ that without external objects our cognitions would occur randomly with “no restriction of place and time.” His response is:

would not be the “same person” over time at the level of ultimate truth. Perhaps the Pudgalavādins could offer a truce according to which the Ābhidharmika and the Yogācāra are “neither the same nor different.”

¹⁴ *vijñaptimātram evedam asadārhābhāsanāt.* / (*Viṃś* 1a-b) – the Lévi edition gives the alternative reading “*evaitad*” as opposed to Anacker’s “*evedam*” (Vasubandhu 1925; 2005). All translations from Sanskrit are my own unless otherwise noted. I will cite the text by the abbreviation “*Viṃś*” and the verse number (verses appear in bold; non-bold text is Vasubandhu’s auto-commentary).

¹⁵ One controversy is how to understand “*traidhātukaṃ*” (that which consists of the three realms), which appears earlier in the commentary and is the only viable candidate to serve as the referent of the “*idam*” (this) in the verse. For now, I have translated the verse simply as “This [world]” leaving it ambiguous enough to allow room for interpretation later. As we’ll see, the understanding of *traidhātukaṃ* is one of the important points in the debate between the two main interpretations of Vasubandhu.

¹⁶ Vasubandhu also brings up two other objections: that multiple people can experience the same object and that dream objects, unlike external objects, do not have causal efficacy. I will discuss these objections in sections 2.4 and 2.5.

But it is not the case that it is unreasonable, because –

Verse 3: The restriction of place and so forth is established, as in a dream.

... First, how is that? In a dream, even without an object, things such as men, women, gardens, bees, etc. are seen in some particular place, not everywhere. In that same place, a thing is seen at a certain time, not all the time. Thus, restriction of place and time is established even without an object. (*Vimś* 3)¹⁷

Dreams make another appearance in this text later (verses 16-18) when he claims that,

“**Perceptual cognition is just as in a dream, etc.**,” because we do not have direct

apprehension of objects.¹⁸ For Vasubandhu, the direct object of perception is a sense-

object or *viṣaya* (akin to a sense-datum). Vasubandhu’s emphasis on dreams and

knowledge can be seen clearly in the following:

Verse 17: ... A person who is not awake does not know that that of which there is a visual sense-object (*viṣaya*) in a dream does not exist.

... people who are asleep and not awake, seeing an object (*artha*) that has not occurred, as in a dream, do not know correctly that that object (*artha*) does not exist. (*Vimś* 17)¹⁹

These passages have obvious resonances with the discussion of dreams in

Descartes’s First Meditation, which includes a type of what some philosophers have

called an argument from ignorance (not to be confused with the logical fallacy of appeal

to ignorance).²⁰ Recall that Descartes’s argument looks like this:

¹⁷ *na khalu na yujyate yasmāt - deśādiniyamaḥ siddhaḥ svapnavat / ... kathaṃ tāvat / svapne vināpy arthena kvacit eva deśe kiṃcit bhramarārāmastrīpuruṣādikaṃ dr̥ṣyate na sarvatra / tatraiva ca deśe kadācit dr̥ṣyate na sarvakālam iti siddho vināpy arthena deśakālaniyamaḥ / (Vimś 3).*

¹⁸ *pratyakṣabuddhiḥ svapnātau yathā / (Vimś 16).*

¹⁹ *svapnadṛgviṣayābhāvaṃ nāprabuddho ‘vagacchati / ... prasupto lokaḥ svapna ivābhūtam arthaṃ paśyan na prabuddhas tad abhāvaṃ yathāvat nāvagacchati / (Vimś 17).* I would translate the compound *svapnadṛgviṣayābhāvaṃ* literally as “the non-existence of that which [corresponds to] a visual sense-object in a dream,” because Vasubandhu doesn’t deny that the *viṣaya* exists, just the *artha*.

²⁰ The difference between the skeptical argument and the fallacy is that the conclusion of the skeptical argument is that we don’t *know* whether there’s an external world or not whereas the conclusion of a fallacious appeal to ignorance is that a lack of evidence proves a more definite conclusion that something either is or is not the case. For example, there’s a difference between saying that a lack of evidence for extraterrestrial life means that we don’t know whether it’s there or not (a skeptical conclusion) and saying that the lack of evidence means there really is no extraterrestrial life (an appeal to ignorance).

Descartes's Argument from Ignorance Based on Dreams

1. If you know things about the external world, then you must know you are not dreaming.
2. But you do *not* know you are not dreaming.
- C: Therefore, you do not know things about the external world.

Keith DeRose gives a more schematic (but logically equivalent) version of the argument from ignorance as follows (where “H” is a skeptical hypothesis and “O” is ordinary knowledge of the external world):

DeRose's Schema of the Argument from Ignorance

1. I don't know that not-H.
2. If I don't know that not-H, then I don't know that O.
- C: I don't know that O. (DeRose 1995, 1)

The advantage of DeRose's characterization is that it doesn't rely specifically on dreams as the skeptical scenario in question; other skeptical scenarios include hallucinations, being a brain-in-a-vat, living in a computer simulation, and so forth. Although Vasubandhu refers to dreams, he also discusses hallucinations of various kinds. For instance, he discusses a person with an eye disease (*taimira*) who sees non-existent “hair-nets” (*Vimś* 1c-d)²¹ as well as the more complex situation of beings' experience of hell-realms as a sort of “collective hallucination” brought about by having similar karmic ripening (*Vimś* 3c-d – 7).²² Matilal suggests that this second sort of hallucination is similar to Descartes's evil demon or brain-in-a-vat scenarios, since these skeptical scenarios could be used to create inter-subjective experience, even if they have usually been used more solipsistically in the West (Matilal 1986, 231).²³

²¹ Anacker's edition says “*keśaṅḍrakāḍī*” (hair-nets, etc.) and Lévi's says “*keśacandrāḍī*” (hair, moons, etc.) (Vasubandhu 2005; 1925).

²² I am borrowing the label “collective hallucination” from Wood 1991, Chs. 9 and 10.

²³ Computer simulations as seen in the film, *The Matrix*, are excellent examples of such inter-subjective skeptical scenarios.

The quotes given above from *Vimś* 3, 16, and 17 are all intended to support Vasubandhu’s main inference: “**This [world] is just cognition-only, because of the appearance of non-existent objects**” (*Vimś* 1ab). Joel Feldman puts this into the form of the standard inference (*anumāna*) of Indian logic as follows:

Feldman’s Characterization of Vasubandhu’s Main Inference

- (1) ... Things in the world appear.
- (2) ... Everything that appears is NEOM [“non-existent outside the mind”]
- (3) ... Things in the world are NEOM [“non-existent outside the mind”]
(Feldman 2005, 530)²⁴

Feldman notes that subject (*pakṣa*) of the inference is “this world,” which he takes to mean “only those things that are alleged to be external to the mind” (Feldman 2005, 531). The reason (*hetu*) is that things appear, the thing to be proved (*sādhya*) is that the world is cognition-only, and the pervasion (*vyāpti*) is that whatever appears is cognition-only. The examples (*drṣṭānta*) are the hallucinations and dreams discussed above. As I’ll discuss in the next few sections, there is quite a bit of debate about what “cognition-only” (*viññapti-mātra*) actually means as well as whether what I have translated as “this [world]” refers to everything that exists or merely the world of normal human experience. I find Feldman’s characterization of the argument a bit too wedded to what he sees as its idealist conclusion.²⁵ To make the argument more neutral with respect to how it is to be interpreted and to more clearly show its basic structure, I would characterize it as follows, leaving the philosophically interesting terms undefined for the time being:

²⁴ For other characterizations of the argument, see Siderits 2007, 149, Hayes 1988a, 102-103, Kochumuttom 2008, 165-166, and Trivedi 2005, 235-236.

²⁵ Feldman also uses Matilal’s logical notation for *anumānas* (for instance, writing “Hp” for “the *pakṣa* is in domain of the *hetu*”). This may be more succinct, but in this context it doesn’t help, so I have represented things more organically. For introductions to theories of inference in Indian logic and the meanings of the inferential terms, see Matilal 1998 and Potter 1977.

Mills's Characterization of Vasubandhu's Main Inference

Thesis (*pratijñā*): This world is cognition-only.

Reason (*hetu*): Because it appears as a non-existent object.

Pervasion (*vyāpti*) and Example (*dr̥ṣṭānta*): Whatever appears as a non-existent object is cognition-only, as in hallucinations and dreams.²⁶

There are obvious affinities between the reason and examples of this argument and the skeptical scenarios of the argument from ignorance; they all involve some sort of error in which the people in error might not recognize their own error. This is possible because both arguments accept what Howard Robinson calls the Phenomenal Principle: “If there sensibly appears to a subject to be something which possesses a particular sensible quality then there is something of which the subject is aware which does possess that sensible quality” (Robinson 1994, 32). In other words, in both skeptical scenarios and appearances of non-existent objects, we really are aware of *something*, although we can't be sure whether that awareness is veridical simply by a phenomenological introspection of our immediate experience. Also, the pervasion (*vyāpti*) – “whatever possesses the appearance of non-existent objects is cognition-only” – is similar to premise two of DeRose's Schema of the Argument from Ignorance given above in that both try to forge a link between cases anyone would recognize as cases of error and our alleged knowledge of external objects. Both arguments accept what Barry Maund calls the Continuity Principle: “There is such continuity between those cases in which the objects appear other than they really are, and the cases of veridical perception, that the

²⁶ I have tried to make my characterization closer to Vasubandhu's own model of inference in his *Method of Debate (Vādaividhi)*, 1-5. Anacker gives an English translation of this text based on fragments found in Tibetan translations of Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccayaṅvṛtti* and Jinendrabuddhi's *Pramāṇasamuccayaṅkā* (Anacker 2005, 31-48). Although there is no negative example as stated above, it's likely that Vasubandhu intends the knowledge that lies within “the scope of the Buddhas” (*buddhagocara*) (*Vimś* 22d) to serve as a negative example in which no appearance of non-existent objects is present. Jonathan Gold (2006) claims that in earlier Yogācāra and in Vasubandhu's *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, dreams are used against external objects while hallucinations are used against the idea of the self. He may be right about those texts, but I don't see this distinction in the *Vimś*, where both dreams and hallucinations serve as examples in the main inference.

same analysis of perception must apply to both” (Maund 2003, 120).²⁷ In effect, both arguments encourage us to ask the following: if you agree that you’re in error in these mundane cases and you agree that erroneous and veridical perceptions are qualitatively similar, how do you know you’re not in error in cases you normally take to be non-erroneous? In both arguments, the idea that we don’t know we’re not in error in such cases does a lot of work.

Nonetheless, someone might object that Vasubandhu’s argument, despite superficial similarities, is not actually all that similar to an argument from ignorance, because the thesis or conclusion (or *pratijñā*) of the above argument seems to be making a claim about the world (that it is cognition-only) rather than a claim about whether we *know* the world (as the conclusion of an argument from illusion does); in other words, it might be objected that the argument is making a metaphysical rather than an epistemological claim. I think this objection jumps the gun a bit, because it is far from clear what Vasubandhu actually means by “this is cognition-only.” Even if Vasubandhu’s ultimate conclusion is that external objects simply do not exist at all (the idealist thesis I will discuss shortly), he gets to that conclusion by first demonstrating that we have no direct knowledge of external objects (as seen in the passages from *Vimś* 3, 16, and 17 discussed above). Whatever the full meaning of the statement, “This is cognition-only,” might be, at the very least it means that we have no direct experience of external objects, either because they are simply not there to experience or because we do not know them directly even if they are there (the question of which of these two meanings is correct will be taken up in the next few sections).

²⁷ Maund named it the Continuity Principle, but the formulation is found in Robinson 1994, 58.

In this section, I have shown that Vasubandhu is presenting an argument that is quite similar to the classic argument from ignorance found in modern and contemporary Western philosophy. How similar it ultimately is to the argument from ignorance very much depends on the nature of its conclusion, in particular whether that conclusion is epistemological or metaphysical. In the next few sections I will attempt to understand what ultimate conclusion Vasubandhu is trying to support with his main inference.

2.3 Idealism or phenomenalism?

What is the purpose of Vasubandhu's argument? This has been the matter of some dispute in contemporary scholarship on Vasubandhu. There are a variety of nuances among various scholars, including various ways to characterize the debates, but I see the main split between what I could call idealist and phenomenalist interpretations. Obviously a great deal of the debate hinges on what we mean by "idealism" and "phenomenalism," which are both notoriously difficult terms. I can't accurately represent each and every scholar who has written on this topic, so instead I will offer my own definitions of these terms that map on to what I see as the real crux of the debate. As Paul Griffiths has noted, it really comes down to whether Vasubandhu is making a metaphysical or epistemological claim, that is, whether Vasubandhu is offering a theory about what kinds of things in fact exist in the universe or about what we as regular human beings are capable of knowing about (Griffiths 1986, 82). One example of such a distinction would be a distinction commonly made between atheists who claim that God does not exist (or at least that the preponderance of evidence is in favor of atheism) and agnostics who claim that human beings can't or don't have knowledge of whether God

exists (leaving open the question of whether God actually *does* exist). Atheists make a metaphysical claim about existence; agnostics make an epistemological claim about our knowledge.²⁸

With this distinction in mind, let me give my own definitions of the two theses involved in this debate.

Idealism: a metaphysical thesis that external, mind-independent objects do not exist

Phenomenalism: an epistemological thesis that all we *know directly* are sense-data, phenomena, cognitions (*vijñapti*), etc.; does not by itself lead to any conclusion about the ontological status of external objects²⁹

Thus, idealists are so to speak “atheists” about the external world; phenomenologists are “agnostics.”

I’m not going to concern myself here with other varieties of idealism such as Platonism, Hegelianism, or Kantian transcendental idealism.³⁰ Some scholars writing on Vasubandhu refer to a theory called “epistemic idealism” or “the claim that we know things not as they really are ... but rather as they are given to us by our ideas, our concepts, and categories” (Trivedi 2005, 232).³¹ This label is usually used as a way to draw a comparison to Kantian transcendental idealism, but for my purposes here I don’t find “epistemic idealism” to be a particularly helpful label, because it obscures what’s really at stake in this context. Both idealists and phenomenologists agree that we are only

²⁸ I am here using “atheism” and “agnosticism” in their more common senses rather than any senses specifically informed by philosophy of religion.

²⁹ In the idiom of contemporary philosophy of mind, one might say that phenomenism in this sense is the thesis that the contents of beliefs about external objects are subjective.

³⁰ Some other varieties of idealism I won’t discuss are conceptual idealism, linguistic idealism, or the idealisms of Fichte, Schelling, or Schopenhauer. I will, however, say a little bit about the monistic idealism of Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta in section 2.5 as a contrast case to the type of idealism Vasubandhu may represent.

³¹ John Dunne applies this label to what he sees as the most Yogācāra-reliant level of Dharmakīrti’s philosophy (Dunne 2004, 59).

directly aware of mental phenomena.³² What's really at stake is whether Vasubandhu is making a metaphysical claim about whether there are external objects *in addition* to these phenomena. Garfield captures the metaphysical dimension of idealism as follows:

Idealism is a contrastive ontology: it is the assignment to the mind and to mental phenomena of a fundamental reality independent of that of external objects, while denying it to the apparently external phenomena and assigning them a merely dependent status, a second-class existence as objects of and wholly dependent on the mind. (Garfield 2002, 155)

Idealists deny that there are any external objects that are mind-independent. Although idealists agree that there are objects that *appear* to be mind-independent, according to idealism such objects are in fact dependent on or even wholly constituted by minds and mental phenomena. Perhaps the clearest (and most radical) characterization of the type of idealism I want to discuss is Berkeley's subjective idealism, which is often summarized by the slogan *esse est percipi aut precipere* (to be is to be perceived or to perceive). According to Berkeley, only ideas and minds exist. One of his more succinct statements of his idealism comes in section three of the *Principles of Human Knowledge*.

The table I write on I say exists; that is, I see and feel it: and if I were out of my study I should say it existed; meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. ... as to what is said of the *absolute* existence of unthinking things, without any relation to their being perceived, that is to me unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*; nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them. (Berkeley 1965, 62)³³

³² Although I should note that some phenomenologists, like A. J. Ayer, claim that sense-data "cannot significantly be said either to be or not be mental" (Ayer 1952, 142). I'm not sure if that statement is meaningful according to the principle of verification or not.

³³ Berkeley's *esse est percipi* claim is also the subject of his *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. In the third dialogue Berkeley has Philonous (the proponent of idealism) say the following to Hylas (who believes in a material substratum): "I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things; since those immediate objects of perception, which according to you, are only appearances of things, I take to be the real things themselves" (Berkeley 1979, 77).

Unlike this idealist stance on the metaphysical status of alleged external objects, phenomenologists, on my definition, leave metaphysical questions about external objects undecided, although they could make a minimal metaphysical claim that mental phenomena, for example, sense data, *do* exist in all cases of perceptual experience (a claim denied by most direct realist and disjunctivist theories of perception).

I leave open the degree of certainty that idealists attach to their conclusion. There may be idealists who assert with 100% conviction that there are no external objects (such as Berkeley). There could be idealists who only feel that the bare majority of evidence points in the direction of idealism. Phenomenologists, on the other hand, leave such a question open and might even suggest any answer is impossible or that rather than worry about external objects, we should simply do something else. Phenomenologists often go on to give theories about how we construct our concepts of external objects out of directly available mental content such as sense-data, and idealists often explain how we come to erroneously believe there are external objects, but I don't think either elaboration is essential to the basic theses at stake in this context.

Just as there are many varieties of idealism, so are there different kinds of phenomenology. Robinson identifies three kinds of phenomenology: "theistic phenomenology, sceptical phenomenology and analytical phenomenology" (Robinson 1994, 226). Theistic phenomenologists, like Berkeley, explain the order of experience "by postulating an immaterial agent," the second type is that of Hume: "the sceptical phenomenologist accepts the orderedness of experience as a brute datum which neither needs nor is susceptible of explanation" (Robinson 1994, 226). Analytical phenomenology is the category of most 20th century phenomenologists, such as A. J. Ayer,

as well as their 19th century precursor, J. S. Mill, who claimed that the concept of a material object just is “a Permanent Possibility of Sensation” (Mill 1865, 243).³⁴

Robinson splits analytical phenomenalism into two kinds: linguistic phenomenalism “which states that there is an equivalence between sentences about physical objects and some appropriate sentence about sense-data” and factual phenomenalism, which is represented by someone “who believes their theory to be a matter of ontology, not language” (Robinson 1994, 227-228). My definition of phenomenalism is compatible with, but not identical to, theistic and skeptical phenomenalism as Robinson defines them. My definition is probably also compatible with linguistic phenomenalism, although phenomenologists like Ayer would refrain from making ontological claims due to the alleged meaninglessness of ontological claims rather than out of any sort of epistemic modesty; however, my definition is incompatible with factual phenomenalism insofar as factual phenomenologists see their phenomenalism as making some sort of ontological claim about external objects. In any case, the aim of my definitions of idealism and phenomenalism is to keep the definitions general enough to encompass different kinds of idealism and phenomenalism while being compatible with the type of idealist or phenomenologist Vasubandhu might be.

I should also explain, at least in a very general sense, what it means in my definition of phenomenalism to know something “directly” and what kinds of things are contained in the class of “sense-data, phenomena, cognitions (*vijñapti*), etc.” The adverb “directly” in this case comes in the context of what has been called an act-object account of perception in which perception is analyzed as a perceptual act that has a particular

³⁴ While Mill is making some sort of metaphysical claim, I think Mill wants to avoid making what he sees as excessive metaphysical claims, since he argues that both Berkeleyan idealists as well as Reidian realists actually agree with him about his definition of matter (Mill 1865, 243-250).

object.³⁵ To perceive or know something directly, then, is to have it as the direct, immediate object of a perceptual state such that it is not mediated by some other object or state.³⁶ Direct realists say that external, mind-independent objects can be directly known in this sense (even if there are other states such as representations involved³⁷), whereas representational or indirect realists agree with phenomenologists and idealists that the direct object of perception is always some other object or state (although representational realists, idealists, and phenomenologists are quite different in other ways).³⁸ What are these objects or states? Here's where "sense-data, phenomena, cognitions (*vijñapti*), etc." come in. I'm making this a very general class so as to cover as many different varieties of phenomenology as possible, but what the items of this list have in common is that they are mental objects or states that possess sensible qualities and of which we can be directly aware in the sense just discussed. I'm not claiming that the terms given all refer to exactly the same thing or that every phenomenologist agrees about how to characterize the

³⁵ This act-object account is opposed by, among others, adverbial theories of perception according to which a perception is simply a state of "being appeared to" such as "being appeared to green-ly."

³⁶ John Foster gives more technical characterizations of direct versus indirect perception. He says that direct realism involves the notion of " ϕ -terminally perceiving" as follows: "a subject S ϕ -terminally perceives an item x if and only if x is a physical item and S perceives x and there is no other physical item y such that S's perceiving of x is perceptually mediated by his perceiving of y" (Foster 2000, 6). Indirect or representative theories of perception, on the other hand, claim that "such perceiving is always perceptually mediated by the perceiving, or sensing, of something of the mind – something whose existence is necessarily confined to the context of the subject's own awareness" (Foster 2000, 9).

³⁷ Some (e.g., E. J. Lowe and Colin McGinn) espouse "direct representationalism" according to which perception somehow involves representational states but is nonetheless direct (Maund 2003, 7).

³⁸ It is often said that indirect theories of perception involve the key ideas that sense-data are incorrigible (you can't doubt *that* you are having a particular experience) and that perception is an inferential process (one infers things about an object from sense-data). Many indirect theories of perception do accept these positions, but I don't think they are essential characteristics, at least as I have characterized representational realism, phenomenology, and idealism.

direct object of perception, but since my definition is general, I'm forming a general class of the things many phenomenologists believe to be the direct objects of perception.³⁹

Furthermore, idealism and phenomenology as I have defined them are not incompatible as long as they apply to different domains: one could be a phenomenologist in epistemology and an idealist in metaphysics, as Berkeley clearly was and as idealist interpretations of Vasubandhu would paint him. How could this be, if phenomenology doesn't lead to any particular metaphysical position? Phenomenology *by itself* does not lead to idealism, but it could be used as a part of an argument for idealism along with other arguments. Berkeley, for instance, argues that we are not directly aware of matter (a sort of phenomenology), but he also gives other arguments, most famously the so-called "Master Argument," which is a conceptual argument with the conclusion that we can't even conceive of a mind-independent material object.⁴⁰ Some interpreters see Vasubandhu in a somewhat similar vein as combining phenomenologist epistemology with conceptual arguments against atomism. Nonetheless, while idealism and phenomenology are compatible, they are logically distinct. One could be a phenomenologist without being an idealist, and – although it's more unusual – it's possible to be an idealist without being a phenomenologist.⁴¹

³⁹ Robinson defines sense-data as follows: "1 It is something of which we are aware. 2 It is non-physical. 3 Its occurrence is logically private to a single subject. 4 It actually possesses standard sensible qualities ... 5 It possesses no intrinsic intentionality..." (Robinson 1994, 1-2).

⁴⁰ See Berkeley 1979, 35-36. For a succinct discussion of the interpretation and evaluation of the Master Argument, see Downing 2011, Sec. 2.2.1

⁴¹ Radically monistic idealisms such as Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta might fit this bill, since there is only one thing that exists: *brahman*. While phenomenologists and Berkeleyan idealists alike accept the reality of subjective experience while denying or suspending judgment about external objects, "an idealist refuter of idealism like Śāṅkara regards or disregards both inner and outer objects as equally objective, equally non-illusory and equally non-real" (Chakrabarti 1992, 97). However, for Śāṅkara "a deeper metaphysical idealism is embraced because nothing but the never-negated pure consciousness is really real" (Chakrabarti 1992, 98). For Śāṅkara there is no sense in denying anything about the external world while upholding mental phenomena, because subjective experience and external objects are ultimately equally unreal.

My characterization of the two theses entirely leaves open the degree of confidence on the part of their proponents, the details involved in the elaboration of various versions of these theses, and whether they could be combined in some way.⁴² I am for the moment more concerned with the basic point each thesis is trying to make. Others are of course free to use “idealism” and “phenomenalism” in other senses. Indeed, brief tours of both contemporary philosophy of perception and scholarship on Vasubandhu reveal a wide range of definitions and other ways of carving up the intellectual terrain of issues concerning perception.⁴³ Some scholars even use the terms “idealism” and “phenomenalism” interchangeably.⁴⁴ I’m *not* claiming that I have discovered once and for all the true meaning of these terms, which would be a bombastically inaccurate claim. I’m simply stipulating these as the most useful definitions for clearing up a particular debate about Vasubandhu; if readers insist on other definitions, we may simply be talking about different things.

Until recent decades, Vasubandhu was almost always taken to be representing an idealist view in the metaphysical sense given above. On this interpretation, Vasubandhu offers something of a forerunner to Berkeley’s subjective idealism, albeit without either a

⁴² My definition of phenomenalism seems *prima facie* incompatible with representational realism (the thesis that we are directly aware of sense-data, but that these sense-data represent, in some way, existing external objects), because representational realism contains a metaphysical claim about the reality of external objects. However, one could take the “representational” side of representational realism as a sort of phenomenalism while taking the “realism” side as an additional metaphysical component added to give an explanation for the regularity of experience. My definition of phenomenalism is, however, entirely incompatible with direct realism, because direct realism takes us to be directly aware of external objects.

⁴³ Some introductions to contemporary philosophy of perception are Bonjour 2011, Maund 2003, Robinson 1994, and Noë and Thompson 2002. More specialized works are Chisholm 1957, Ayer 1952, Foster 2000, and Burge 2010. Burge carves up the territory quite differently: he rejects what he calls “Compensatory Individual Representationalism” (which would probably include most views that I am referring to as “phenomenalist” and “idealist”) in favor of his own view of “Anti-Individualism” (Burge 2010, Ch. 1).

⁴⁴ Robinson and Maund sometimes use “idealism” and “phenomenalism” interchangeably (Robinson: 249 n. 1; Maund 2003, 8). Matilal, in his discussion of Vasubandhu, isn’t always entirely clear on the distinction between phenomenalism and idealism (Matilal 1986, Ch. 7).

soul or a God! One might call it “subjective idealism without a subject.” Many scholars accept an idealist reading of Vasubandhu in the general, metaphysical sense I have described, although they don’t all agree on every detail (Sinha 1972, Ch. 1, Shastri 1997, 43, Matilal 1986, Ch. 7, Griffiths 1986, 82-84, Kapstein 1988, Williams 1989, Ch. 4, Wood 1991, Chakrabarti 1992, Sharma 1992, Gethin 1998, 244-250, Hopkins 1999, 37-38, Garfield 2002, 155-160, Feldman 2005, Taber 2005, 167-168 n. 44, Siderits 2007, Ch. 8).

The main alternative interpretation is that Vasubandhu puts forward a form of phenomenalism in the sense discussed above. In calling Vasubandhu a phenomenalist, one need not have in mind specific versions of phenomenalism, such as Mill’s or Ayer’s. Unlike idealism, phenomenalism in my sense does not lead to any particular conclusion about the ontological status of external objects. Thus, phenomenalist interpreters of Vasubandhu take him to be making a primarily epistemological claim about what we can know rather than a metaphysical claim about what actually exists. While few of the scholars I place in the phenomenalist camp actually use the term “phenomenalism” as a label for their own theories, they do all agree with the basic position I have described as phenomenalism and deny that Vasubandhu should be read as any kind of metaphysical idealist (Anacker 2005, 159, Wayman 1979, Willis 1979, 20-36, Kochumuttom 2008, Hall 1986, Hayes 1988a, 96-104⁴⁵, King 1995, Ch. 5, King 1998, Lusthaus 2002, Trivedi 2005).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hayes extends such an interpretation to Dignāga’s *Ālambanaparīkṣā* (*Examination of the Basis of Perception*), which is also usually read as an idealist work (Hayes 1988a, 173-178).

⁴⁶ Hayes is in fact one of the few to explicitly refer to this interpretation as a kind of phenomenalism. King and Lusthaus refer to it as phenomenology, and Lusthaus draws specific comparisons with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Trivedi says that Vasubandhu is closest to “epistemic idealism.” Kochumuttom sees Vasubandhu as being compatible with “realistic pluralism” and reads the *Vimś* as a critique of a realistic

This distinction I'm trying to make between these interpretations of Vasubandhu is analogous to a difference between Berkeley and Hume. Idealist interpreters take Vasubandhu, like Berkeley, to be making a metaphysical denial of the existence of external, mind-independent objects. Those who interpret Vasubandhu as a phenomenalist take Vasubandhu to be denying, like Hume, that we really know whether there are or are not external objects behind our impressions or cognitions.⁴⁷

But which interpretation is correct? Griffiths and Garfield both say it's very difficult if not impossible for them to imagine not reading the text as idealist (Griffiths 1986, 83, Garfield 2002, 159), and some phenomenalist interpreters claim to find no reason to think Vasubandhu might deny the existence of external objects (e.g., Wayman 1979, 65). But I find the text itself far from obvious. It's worth a careful look. In the next two sections, I will try as carefully as possible to take into account what I see as the best evidence for each interpretation and come to a conclusion after evaluating both kinds of evidence.⁴⁸ My method will be to assess the evidence for each interpretation, both direct textual evidence and evidence that makes use of Vasubandhu's larger tradition. As I will argue, I find both of these sorts of evidence to be inconclusive, since each can

theory of knowledge (what I'd call direct realism). Others, especially Wayman, Willis, and Hall, disagree with idealist interpretations but never give a specific name to their alternative. My reasons for choosing "phenomenalism" as the label for this rather eclectic crew of non-idealists are that this label is less technically-demanding than Husserlian phenomenology, less easy to conflate with idealism than epistemic idealism, and less of a reaction to an obvious misreading of Vasubandhu as a monist than Kochumuttom's characterization. Jonathan Gold provides another reason to avoid calling Vasubandhu a phenomenologist: "His work does not take the direct examination of 'experience' as its theme, but, rather, it draws upon scripture and rational argumentation for its critiques of the available accounts of reality" (Gold 2011, Sec. 5). More positively, I do think all of the non-idealist interpreters listed would agree that Vasubandhu emphasizes epistemological questions and takes the direct object of perception to be a cognition (*vijñapti*) in precisely the way I have defined phenomenalism.

⁴⁷ Hume's phenomenalism is found in *Treatise* 1.4.2, "Of scepticism with regard to the senses." Of course, Hume claims that nature ultimately prevents us from truly suspending judgment about the external world. A helpful treatment of this section can be found in Fogelin 1985, Chs. 6 and 7.

⁴⁸ For differing overviews of the idealism-phenomenalism debate, see Kaplan 1992, 195-205, and Gold 2011, Sec. 5.

successfully make sense of the text. The evidence in favor of a phenomenalist interpretation that I finally endorse is an application of the principle of charity: I find that Vasubandhu's arguments simply turn out to be more persuasive on a phenomenalist reading.

Before moving on, I should pause and take stock of why the idealism-phenomenalism dispute is important for the larger issue of the presence of the issue of external-world skepticism in classical India. What difference does it make to my overall experiment in cross-cultural philosophy whether Vasubandhu is an idealist or a phenomenalist? If Vasubandhu is an idealist, he is not demonstrating a concern for external-world skepticism, because, as Berkeley has argued, skepticism and idealism are fundamentally opposed (Berkeley 1979, 90-91). External-world skepticism denies that we know *whether or not* there exists an external, mind-independent world, but idealism is a form of *nihilism* about the external world. Idealism implies that we *can* know whether the external, mind-independent world exists, since idealists claim to know that it does not exist.⁴⁹ If Vasubandhu – who I see as the most promising candidate for a philosopher concerned with external-world skepticism in classical Indian philosophy – is not raising skeptical concerns, then the prospects for skepticism in classical India are dim, and we have some evidence in favor of Michael Williams's contention that skepticism is not an intuitive problem endemic to epistemological theorizing.

Suppose, however, that Vasubandhu is a phenomenalist in the sense I've given. Is he then raising concerns similar to those of an external-world skeptic? Not quite. By itself, phenomenism does not claim, as skepticism does, that we *don't* or even *can't in*

⁴⁹ Using Pyrrhonian terms, idealism is negative dogmatism about the external world, not skepticism.

any way know whether the external world exists, it merely claims that we do not perceive it directly. One could build off of phenomenalism to say that we know the external world in other ways, as representational realists might do in arguing that the existence of the external world provides the best explanation for the regularity of experience. However, because one could also start with phenomenalist principles and then argue for idealism out of other considerations (*à la* Berkeley), phenomenalism alone is not sufficient to guarantee either realism or idealism. It is because of this inherently metaphysically agnostic attitude within phenomenalism that I find phenomenalism a great deal closer to a concern for skepticism than it is to either realism or idealism. Despite the fact that most 19th and 20th century phenomenologists thought of phenomenalism as an answer to skepticism, I find it to be an invitation to skeptical concerns (I will discuss this curious state of affairs in section 2.7). Like other versions of phenomenalism, Vasubandhuan phenomenalism would be only a few steps from a genuinely skeptical concern. Having dispatched with direct realism, phenomenologists could become fully concerned with skepticism if they find the idealist and representational realist alternatives to rest on shaky epistemological foundations. Thus, if Vasubandhu is a phenomenologist, there would be partial evidence for Stroud's intuitive thesis: we would have some reason to think that the types of considerations that often lead to skepticism are indeed inevitable in epistemological theorizing.

2.4 Evidence for idealism

My purpose in this section is to give what seem to me to be the best reasons in favor of an idealist reading of Vasubandhu's *Vimśikārikā*. In the next section I will

give what seem to me to be the best reasons in favor of a phenomenalist reading, trying to give each side a fair hearing. It would help to first explain what I think would *not* constitute good reasons for each reading. In supporting an idealist reading, for instance, I don't think it will do to look at the text and say, "Look! Idealism!" as if it were obvious based on the Sanskrit text or its English translations. As I will make clear in this and the next two sections, the text contains several philosophically important words that are of a technical, vague, or ambiguous nature; interpreting the text requires attention to the nuances of the relevant words. Neither do I think this question can be resolved solely by an appeal to the later Yogācāra tradition, because we can't be sure about the extent to which the tradition changed. This isn't to say that the later tradition and its opponents are totally irrelevant, but such considerations are at best a partial guide for interpreting Vasubandhu – it's possible that Vasubandhu was not an idealist even if later members of his tradition were.

I will discuss four types of evidence for an idealist reading. First, there may be direct textual evidence. Second, objections to Vasubandhu reveal that both he and his opponents took his view to be idealist. Third, one can compare the structure of Vasubandhu's arguments in the *Vimś* with some of his more explicitly metaphysical arguments elsewhere. Fourth, it may be that the classical Indian tradition lacked any clear distinction between metaphysics and epistemology.

This first type of evidence idealist interpreters might present is that there does seem to be direct textual evidence for an idealist reading if we understand Vasubandhu's terms correctly. The *Vimś* begins with the following introductory commentary:

In Mahāyāna that which consists of the three realms (*traidhātukaṃ*) is established as cognition-only (*viññapti-mātra*). In the *Sūtra*⁵⁰, it is said, “O sons of the Conqueror, that which consists of the three realms is indeed mind-only (*cittamātra*).” ... “Only” (*mātra*) is for the purpose of the negation of an object (*artha*). (*Viṃś* 1)⁵¹

“That which consists of the three realms” (*traidhātukaṃ*) is a substantive adjective used to refer to the three realms of existence taken as a whole.⁵² In Buddhist texts, these three realms are often referred to as the realm of desire (*kāma-dhātu*), the realm of form (*rūpa-dhātu*), and the realm of formlessness (*ārūpya-dhātu*) (Hall 1986, 15-16, Hayes 1988a, 100-101). The first realm is the realm experienced by ordinary people, and the others are available to more developed Buddhist practitioners. Idealist interpretations take *traidhātukaṃ* to refer to the sum total of existence, thus making Vasubandhu’s conclusion a metaphysical point about the whole of reality (e.g., Garfield 2002, 157). The conclusion of Vasubandhu’s main inference concerns the subject (*pakṣa*) of “those things that are alleged to be external to the mind” and shows that they are not external to the mind (Feldman 2005, 531). That is, Vasubandhu is an idealist in my sense of the term, since he claims that the whole of reality is mind-dependent or “cognition-only” (*viññapti-mātra*).

But what does he mean by “cognition-only” (*viññapti-mātra*)? Let’s start with “*viññapti*,” which I have translated as “cognition.” Vasubandhu gives a list of synonyms for this word: awareness (*citta*), mind (*manas*), and consciousness (*viññāna*) (*Viṃś* 1).

⁵⁰ The *Sūtra* in question appears to be the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, which is also chapter 26 of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (Anacker 2005, 161, Taber and Kellner 2012, 20, 21 n. 35). The original sentence, found in stage six of the *sūtra*, appears in the Rahder edition of the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* as follows: “Tasyaivaṃ bhavati / cittamātram idaṃ yad idaṃ traidhātukaṃ” (DBS, p. 49).

⁵¹ *mahāyāne traidhātukaṃ viññaptimātraṃ vyavasthāpyate. cittamātraṃ bho jinaputrā yad uta traidhātukaṃ iti sūtrāt. ... mātraṃ ity arthapratīṣedhārthaṃ. Viṃś* 1.

⁵² In this passage, it is in the neuter as an adjectival form, but as a masculine noun *traidhātuka* would mean “the 3 worlds” (Monier-Williams 1994, 462).

While these words have slightly different shades of meaning in their Buddhist contexts⁵³, here Vasubandhu is pointing to their commonality as states of consciousness, which from a Buddhist perspective are momentary occurrences (one shouldn't construe "mind" as some sort of substantive entity). As Bruce Hall puts it, "*Vijñapti* designates the basic phenomenon of conscious experience, without requiring its separation into object, subject, and act of cognition" (Hall 1979, 13). In the parlance of contemporary philosophy of perception what Vasubandhu calls *vijñapti* lacks intrinsic intentionality, that is, it does not in itself point to anything outside of itself, which some philosophers see as a feature of sense-data (Robinson 1994, 2).

Lastly, there is the matter that the word "only" is said to be "for the purpose of the negation of an object." What is this "object" (*artha*)? The Sanskrit word "*artha*" is as ambiguous as the English words "object" or "thing." Idealist interpreters take this as referring to an "external object" (*bāhyārtha*), an external, mind-independent object, because the text makes sense if we take its overall purpose to be the denial of such an object. To negate the existence of an external, mind-independent object is a straightforward espousal of idealism.

Another portion of the text that idealist interpreters point to takes place in Vasubandhu's critique of the material theories of the Vaiśeṣikas and Vaibhāṣikas (*Viṃś* 11-15).⁵⁴ After raising the objection that the Buddha himself spoke of material form

⁵³ Hall notes that etymologically *vijñapti* means "the act of causing [someone] to know [something] distinctly" and that in Sarvāstivāda it came to refer to "manifest *karma*" (Hall 1979, 8-9). Furthermore, these terms "appear traditionally in different lists": *vijñāna* is one of the five *skandhas*, *citta* is "a single thought," and *manas* is the sixth sense organ (Hall 1979, 10-13). See also the discussion of these terms at *Abhidharmakośa* 2.34.

⁵⁴ For more detailed treatments of this section, see Kapstein 1988 and Siderits 2007, 159-167.

(*rūpa*) as one of the sense-bases (*āyatana*) that brings about cognitions, Vasubandhu considers three possible theories:

It's not that that [*āyatana*] is the sense-object (*viśaya*) as one, nor as many atomically, nor as those [atoms] collected, because an atom is not established. *Viṃś* 11.⁵⁵

Vasubandhu argues against each of these options. The first option can't be right because it presupposes the existence of a whole above its parts (which is never seen and is besides not possible given Abhidharma mereological reductionism), the second option doesn't work because we can't see individual atoms, and the third isn't good because an atom can't be philosophically established. To show that an atom can't be established, Vasubandhu gives several extremely clever arguments to show that "the conjunction of partless minimal parts entails various absurdities ... and ... spatial extension and simplicity are ... mutually exclusive properties" (Kapstein 1988, 39). One of the absurdities of conjoining partless atoms is that each atom would have to have six sides (front, back, left, right, top, bottom) where the other atoms conjoin with it, but if it did, it would have parts and couldn't be genuinely partless; and if it were partless, it couldn't conjoin with other atoms to make a larger, visible object, because all the atoms would collapse into one atomic point (*Viṃś* 12). Another highlight comes when Vasubandhu considers the Vaibhāṣika theory that it is aggregates of atoms that conjoin, not individual atoms. He argues that the Vaibhāṣika atomists can't explain shadow (*chāya*) or blockage (*vṛtī*) as during a sunrise, because an atom allegedly has no "difference of direction" (*digbhāgabheda*) as a singular, partless entity; if an individual atom can't account for that, neither can an aggregate of atoms (*Viṃś* 14).

⁵⁵ *na tad ekaṃ na cānekaṃ viśayaḥ paramāṇuśaḥ/
na ca te saṃhatā yasmāt paramāṇur na sidhyati// Viṃś* 11.

Vasubandhu ends the section by claiming, “When that [atom] is unestablished, there being an object of vision, etc., such as material form (*rūpa*), etc., is not established. Thus (*iti*), cognition-only (*vijñapti-mātra*) is established!” (*Vimś* 15).⁵⁶ According to an idealist reading, Vasubandhu’s critique of atomism is an argument for idealism, because it shows that the concept of atoms does not survive conceptual analysis, and Vasubandhu accepts the Abhidharma criterion that that which does not survive conceptual analysis cannot exist (Siderits 2007, 162-163).

More evidence for idealism might be found in verse 17. There the analogy is given comparing, on the one hand, people who awake to discover what they took to be objects in a dream don’t really exist and, on the other hand, people who are “awake” due to having “non-conceptual cognition of the supermundane” (*lokottaranirvikalpajñāna*), which allows such people to apprehend “the non-existence of the object” (*viṣayābhāva*) (*Vimś* 17). Griffiths takes this analogy to mean that “when one is fully awake one will realize that external objects do not exist and that the only thing which does exist is ‘mind’ or ‘representation’” (Griffiths 1986, 84); Rupert Gethin agrees with this reading (Gethin 1998, 248-249).

Another feature of the text that idealist interpreters point to is what Thomas Wood calls the doctrine of collective hallucination (Wood 1991, Chs. 9-10). This idea is presented as a reply to the objection that if a cognition had no object, there would be “no non-restriction in a stream of consciousness”⁵⁷ or in other words, multiple people wouldn’t see the same thing (*Vimś* 2). While dreams are entirely private affairs, this

⁵⁶ Furthermore, this means that when the Buddha spoke of material form (*rūpa*) as a sense-basis (*āyatana*), he was not speaking literally, but for pedagogical purposes of helping people realize selflessness (Vasubandhu makes this point in verses nine and ten).

⁵⁷ *sañtānāniyamo na ca* (*Vimś* 2b).

objection argues that veridical cognitions have as their objects public, external objects. In response, Vasubandhu brings up the situation of *pretas* or “hungry ghosts” who live in a hell realm. All of the hungry ghosts see rivers of pus and other horrific sights due to the similarity of their *karmic* ripening (*karmavipāka*) (*Viṃś* 3cd). Vasubandhu later argues that the hell guardians (*narakapāla*) who torture the hungry ghosts can’t exist, because if they did, they would be suffering too much to be able to torture others. Thus, the guardians must be illusory mental projections of the denizens of hell (*Viṃś* 4cd). Because such hell realms are collective hallucinations in which the same non-existent pus rivers and hell guardians are seen by multiple people, Vasubandhu has found a counter-example to the objection that publicly-shared experiences require an external object. According to idealist interpreters like Wood, *karma* performs a similar function as God in Berkeley’s idealism, since Vasubandhu “argues ... that *karma* alone ensures this commonality of experience, and not a common world of real, external objects” (Wood 1991, 166).⁵⁸

The second type of evidence for idealist readings is to look at the type of objections both Vasubandhu and his opponents raise against his conclusions. Perhaps we can gain insight into what Vasubandhu’s conclusion *is* by looking at what it is thought to oppose. According to idealist interpreters such as Griffiths, these objections “are just the kinds of question which have been asked of idealists in the West” (Griffiths 1986, 83).

For example, Vasubandhu raises three objections in verse two: that if a cognition doesn’t

⁵⁸ Also, there are idealist-seeming elements aren’t present in the *Viṃś*, but that are prominent in Vasubandhu’s other texts. One example is the “storehouse consciousness” (*ālaya-vijñāna*), which is discussed in *Triṃśikākārikā* 2, *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* 6, and *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* 1.9. The storehouse consciousness is a repository of karmic seeds where these seeds exist until they ripen in experience. This could be an elaboration of the collective hallucination theory of experience discussed by Wood, since it gives a theory of experience that does not rely on external objects. It is also usually characterized as existing at a deeper level: “in its guise as *ālaya-vijñāna* the mind exists per se and not as an illusion” (Garfield 2002, 158). Taken in this way, the storehouse consciousness is evidence for an idealist reading.

have an object, there would be no “restriction of time and place” (*deśakālanīyama*), no “non-restriction to a stream of consciousness” (*sañtānānīyama*), and no “causal efficacy” (*kr̥tyakriyā*) (*Vimś* 2). The assumption behind these objections is that these features of our experience could only happen if there are external, mind-independent objects; such objects have specific spatial-temporal dimensions, can be perceived by multiple individuals, and are able to cause particular effects. If such objections reveal that Vasubandhu means to deny the existence of precisely these sorts of objects, this makes his conclusion idealist.⁵⁹

Likewise, John Taber has pointed out that the many objections proffered by opponents of Vasubandhu and Yogācāra seem to reveal that Brahmanical and Jain philosophers considered Vasubandhu and his Yogācāra supporters to be idealists (Taber 2005, 167-168 n. 44). For instance, a common realist objection is that illusory experiences such as hallucinations and dreams are parasitic on the experience of real objects, which eliminates the force of the reason and examples in Vasubandhu’s main inference. The Naiyāyikas Vātsyāyana and Uddyotakara argue that illusory experiences are the result of erroneously characterizing an experience using the memory of a past veridical experience (e.g., mistaking a pole for a human being when looking from a distance). Naiyāyikas analyze this as a case of erroneously taking one object to be another (*anyathā-khyāti*), which presupposes the existence of objects in general, which is

⁵⁹ Idealist interpreters point to other objections as well, such as the objection that perception is a means of knowledge that establishes the existence of external objects (*Vimś* 16) or the objection that ethical infractions can’t occur if there is no body or speech (*Vimś* 18cd).

opposed to the Yogācāra analysis in which we take pure cognitions to be external objects.⁶⁰

Other realist philosophers from Brahmanical and Jain schools presented similar objections.⁶¹ The Advaita Vedāntin Śāṅkara, while himself an idealist of a very different kind, also presents parasitism objections against Yogācāra.⁶² Candrakīrti, a fellow Buddhist from the rival Madhyamaka school, argues against Yogācāra in his *Madhyamakāvātāra*. Candrakīrti gives several arguments against the thesis that consciousness is intrinsically existent as a dependent nature (*paratantrasvabhāva*). For example, he objects to a Yogācāra view that consciousness must exist intrinsically because it can explain the memories of a previous dream that a person has while awake, whereas an external object is not needed to explain this phenomenon. Candrakīrti points out that if the ability to form a memory of something tells us that that thing exists, then Yogācāras have to admit that external objects exist, too, because people do sometimes remember their perceptions of external objects.⁶³ Of course, Yogācāras might say this argument begs the question (I would agree); however, that it seems to beg the question against idealism shows that Mādhyamikas like Candrakīrti took Yogācāra to be a form of idealism. While the evidence from opponents is a partial consideration (nobody should read Vasubandhu as an idealist *solely* because his opponents do), it is nonetheless an

⁶⁰ This objection is developed in Vatsyāyana's NB 4.2.33-35 and Uddyotakara's NV 4.2.33-35. Some interesting studies of these objections can be found in Feldman 2005, Sinha 1972, 170-181, Dasti 2012, 3-9, and Phillips 2012, 41-44.

⁶¹ For studies of similar realist objections from the Mīmāṃsāka Kumārila, see Sinha 1972, 117-148, from Vyāsa's commentary on the Yoga-Sūtra, see Sharma 1992, and from the Jain philosopher Mallisena, see Sinha 1972, Ch. 4.

⁶² See Chakrabarti 1992 for a study of Śāṅkara's idealist refutation of idealism and a comparison with Kant's idealist refutation of idealism.

⁶³ See *Madhyamakāvātāra* 6.49; for a helpful analysis of this argument, see Fenner 1983, 253. For more on Candrakīrti's critique of Yogācāra, see Fenner 1983 and Huntington and Wangchen 1989, 60-67.

important one, if we assume that such opponents were correctly representing Vasubandhu and his Yogācāra followers.

A third type of evidence for an idealist reading is found by looking at examples of other things that Vasubandhu *does* explicitly deny in a metaphysical sense. Two examples are the self (*ātman*) and God (*īśvara*). If there is a similarity between these explicit metaphysical denials and Vasubandhu's arguments about external objects, then there is good reason to see him as an idealist. While Vasubandhu (like any good Buddhist) denies the self in his Yogācāra writings, this sort of evidence relies on the more explicit arguments found in the *Abhidharmakośa*. Therefore, it relies on taking the author of that text and Yogācāra texts such as the *Viṃś* to be the same author (or at least the same stream of author-moments). Chapter nine of the *Abhidharmakośa* contains arguments against the Pudgalavāda Buddhists, who argue that the existence of a person (*pudgala*) is compatible with Buddhist doctrines.⁶⁴ Vasubandhu holds that this view is incompatible with Buddhism because he argues that accepting the existence of the *pudgala* is tantamount to accepting the existence of an *ātman*. He asks, "How then is this known: that this self is merely a designation for a stream of aggregates, but does not refer to another thing that is to be designated (i.e., a self)? Because there is neither perception nor inference [of the self]" (AK, p. 431).⁶⁵ Proponents of Vasubandhuan idealism would see a similar structure in his arguments in the *Viṃś* with regard to external objects.

⁶⁴ Duerlinger 1997 gives a through treatment of the controversy between Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins (or Vātsīputrīyas).

⁶⁵ *kathaṃ punar idaṃ gamyate skandhasaṅtāna evedam ātmābhidhānaṃ vartate nānyasminn abidheya iti. prastyakṣānumānābhāvāt.* AK, p. 431.

John Taber and Birgit Kellner develop a nuanced version of this strategy, identifying the general parts of an *anupalabdhi* argument (or argument from non-apprehension):

The principle behind an *anupalabdhi* argument is that if something exists, it will somehow make its presence known; it will be accessible to one of the *pramāṇas*. If there is no evidence for something, if no *pramāṇa* reveals it, then we may conclude that it does not exist *to be* revealed. (Taber and Kellner 2012, 14)

This general strategy is applied to the self in three stages:

(1) There is no perception of a self ... (2) There is no statement of the Buddha affirming a self – to the contrary, there are many statements by which he appears to deny it – nor is there any orthodox teaching that implies its existence. Finally, (3) there is no basis for inferring a self. Therefore, given the total lack of evidence for a self we may conclude that there is none. (Taber and Kellner 2012, 14)

Taber and Kellner are careful to note that an *anupalabdhi* argument should not be taken either as deductive or as a strict inference (*anumāna*); rather, an *anupalabdhi* argument should be taken as abductive or as an argument to the best explanation (Taber and Kellner 2012, 19-20). That is, the lack of evidence for something does not constitute a logically deductive argument that that thing does not exist; rather it gives inductive evidence in favor of the conclusion that something does not exist.

According to Taber and Kellner, this is the type of argument Vasubandhu employs in the *Viṃś*, and there is no formal *anumāna* in *Viṃś* 1 as many scholars believe. I'll return to the issue of the status of *Viṃś* 1 near the end of the next section. Here I'll represent Taber and Kellner's reading of the whole text as an *anupalabdhi* argument. On this reading, the *anupalabdhi* argument in the *Viṃś* takes place in three stages. In the first stage (verses 2-7, 18-21), Vasubandhu appeals to reasoning and argues that "objects do not have to be postulated in order to account for the facts of experience" (Taber and

Kellner 2012, 26). In the second stage (verses 8-15), Vasubandhu appeals to scripture and argues against “the idea that scripture provides evidence for the existence of objects” (Taber and Kellner 2012, 27). In the third stage (verses 16-17), “Vasubandhu turns to perception, to show that it, too, really doesn’t provide any evidence for the existence of objects” (Taber and Kellner 2012, 31). The *Vimś* defends the conclusion that external objects do not exist with an abductive *anupalabdhi* argument, which shows that neither reasoning, nor scripture, nor perception give evidence in favor of external objects. Thus, Vasubandhu’s argument in the *Vimś* has a similar structure as his argument concerning the self in the AK, although he covers the three options in reverse order.

Vasubandhu’s conclusion is in favor of the metaphysical thesis of idealism, but

Taber and Kellner note

The overall strategy of the text is epistemological ... It considers for each *pramāṇa* what it can prove; is it powerful enough to establish the existence of things that are causing our cognitions? And in each case it answers, no. Careful not to offend against the Mahāyāna belief that the true nature of reality can only be known in *nirvikalpaka samādhi* [non-conceptual meditation], Vasubandhu refrains from stating his conclusion himself. He leaves it for the reader to draw the conclusion... (Taber and Kellner 2012, 35).

Other examples of metaphysical denials are found in Vasubandhu’s arguments for atheism about the sort of permanent, creator God (*īśvara*) supported by some theistic Brahmanical schools such as Nyāya.⁶⁶ One of Vasubandhu’s argument relies on pointing to absurd consequences: if there were a single cause of everything in the universe (i.e., God), then the universe would have arisen all at once. But that is obviously false. So, the universe was not caused by a single cause such as God. And if the opponent tries to say

⁶⁶ Chakrabarti 1989 gives a nice overview and analysis of many versions of Nyāya arguments for theism. It should be noted that Nyāya endorses a “potter model” of God according to which God creates the world with permanently-existing atoms and souls (as a potter creates pots from previously-existing clay).

that God intended things to arise sequentially, then Vasubandhu points out that the causes of things in the universe are these numerous intentions, not a single creator. So, the universe can't have a single cause such as God.⁶⁷ This argument may not be convincing; I find it spectacularly unconvincing as it stands, since a theist could simply say that God created the numerous intentions. Nonetheless, this argument can be compared to the sorts of absurd consequences that are said to follow from material theories in *Vimś* 11-15. In both kinds of arguments, idealist interpreters would say, Vasubandhu is pointing to the absurd consequences of accepting the existence of something in order to support a metaphysical denial of that thing; just as he denies the existence of God in the AK, so does he deny the existence of atoms and thereby external objects in the *Vimś*.

The fourth and last kind of evidence for idealism I will consider is a more general version of the previous sort of evidence. Some scholars argue that the Indian and Buddhist philosophical traditions in general made no clear distinction between metaphysics and epistemology. Because of this, any argument that external objects are unknown is *ipso facto* an argument that such objects do not exist. For any classical Indian philosopher, phenomenalism in my sense would have been a sufficient reason for idealism. Therefore, according to this line of argument, all of Vasubandhu's arguments against the direct awareness of external objects are themselves arguments for idealism; furthermore, phenomenalist interpretations are wrong because they rely on a distinction

⁶⁷ See the commentary on AK 2.64, p. 101-102. Vasubandhu's atheist arguments are discussed in more detail by Hayes 1988b and Katura 2003. The atheist arguments of the later Yogācāra Ratnakīrti are discussed in great detail in Patil 2009.

between metaphysics and epistemology that was simply not present in the tradition of which Vasubandhu was a part.⁶⁸

2.5 Evidence for phenomenism

Having explained the case for an idealist interpretation of Vasubandhu, now it's time to see what evidence can be adduced for a phenomenalist reading. One type of reason that will not do is to say something like the following: "Idealism is a silly or irrational theory. Vasubandhu was neither silly nor irrational. Therefore, Vasubandhu was not an idealist." Whatever else it may be, idealism of various kinds has been developed by some of the greatest philosophers in both India and the West in systematic, rationally-argued ways. Idealism may be wrong and it may be currently unpopular (although it's not quite as unpopular as some contemporary philosophers seem to think⁶⁹), but I think idealism demands our philosophical respect. Claiming that Vasubandhu is a phenomenalist need not amount to a denigration of idealism.

Another argument against idealism that I don't think will do is to misconstrue what may be Vasubandhu's idealism as a form of *monistic* idealism akin to Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. As Kochumuttom and Lusthaus have pointed out, some scholars have interpreted Vasubandhu in this way (Kochumuttom 2008, 1, Lusthaus 2002, 4-5). I agree

⁶⁸ Versions of this type of argument can be found in Williams 1989, 279-280 n. 6, Siderits 2007, 162, Garfield 2002, 160, and Stoltz 2011. A specific articulation of the lack of a distinction between metaphysics and epistemology in classical Indian philosophy can perhaps be found in the Nyāya slogan "whatever exists is nameable and knowable" (*astitvaṃ jñeyatvaṃ abhidheyatvaṃ*). Roy Perrett explains this idea and quite convincingly argues that "the thesis is demonstrably false" (Perrett 2000, 317).

⁶⁹ Chakrabarti notes idealist tendencies in contemporary philosophers such as Donald Davidson and Hilary Putnam because such philosophers accept that "the objective and the only available notion of reality is still grooved with our thought and our talk. Whether we should call such double-aspect views 'realisms' or 'idealisms' of different shades is a largely nomenclatural question. It was once fashionable to call all of them by names linked with idealism ... Nowadays 'realism' seems to be more in vogue with adjuncts like 'Anti', 'Quasi', 'Reductive', 'Internal', etc." (Chakrabarti 1992, 93).

with Kochumuttom and Lusthaus that such interpretations are implausible, as Vasubandhu explicitly refers to multiple beings and multiple Buddhas (e.g., *Vimś* 3-5, 21-22). However, Vasubandhu could be a qualitative monist who claims that multiple things exist, but that only one *kind* of thing exists: mental phenomena. It's unlikely that anyone could see Vasubandhu as a numerical monist like Śāṅkara without heavily Advaita-tinted glasses.⁷⁰ But in that case Kochumuttom and Lusthaus are simply missing the mark in their attacks on idealist interpretations, constructing a "straw idealist" as it were.⁷¹ If Vasubandhu is an idealist, he is a *qualitative* monist, but a *numerical* pluralist.

But is he that kind of idealist? There are several reasons to think that he is not, according to those advocating phenomenalist interpretations, and many reasons to think he was a phenomenalist in the sense given in section 2.3. I'll consider four types of evidence for a phenomenalist interpretation. First, any textual evidence for idealism can be construed in phenomenalist terms. Second, there may be some direct textual evidence for phenomenism. Third, Vasubandhu's arguments in the *Vimś* don't necessarily follow the same structure as his arguments elsewhere, nor did he necessarily share the fuzzy metaphysics-epistemology distinction predominant in the tradition. Fourth, Vasubandhu's arguments support phenomenism better than they support idealism.

⁷⁰ Also, there is the fact that Śāṅkara quite explicitly argued against Yogācāra idealism and thus couldn't have seen their idealism as identical to his own (Chakrabarti 1992). T. R. V. Murti, one of the scholars Kochumuttom cites as providing a monistic interpretation of Yogācāra, does admit that Yogācāra and Advaita Vedānta are different in that the one thing actively creates the universe in Yogācāra whereas it is inert in Advaita; however, the Advaita tint of the glasses through which Murti interprets Yogācāra is evident: "Vijñāna [consciousness] is Cosmic, Impersonal Will, realising itself through the projection and retraction of the object" (Murti 1955, 316). Murti also goes on to compare Yogācāra with Hegel and Fichte (Murti 1955, 317).

⁷¹ Wood agrees that Yogācāras did not intend to be monistic, absolute idealists, but he thinks "there are compelling philosophical reasons for thinking that the Vijñānavādins *should* have been absolute idealists, even though the texts show rather clearly that they weren't" (Wood 1991, 191).

The first type of evidence phenomenalist interpreters point to is that any of the textual evidence given in favor of an idealist interpretation can be construed in phenomenalist terms. Kochumuttom's translation and commentary on the *Vimś* attempts to do this with the entire text (Kochumuttom 2008, Ch. 5), but here I'll concentrate on those passages discussed as textual evidence for idealism earlier: the introductory commentary, the critique of material theories, and the dream-waking analogy.

Two key words in Vasubandhu's introductory commentary are "*traidhātukaṃ*" (that which consists of the three realms) and "*viññapti-mātra*" (cognition-only). Whereas idealist interpreters take the first to mean the sum total of existence and the second to indicate a metaphysical rejection of external objects, phenomenalist interpreters construe both terms in an epistemological sense. Kochumuttom takes "*traidhātukaṃ*" as an adjective modifying implied nouns of mind (*citta*) and mental phenomena (*caittas*), so he translates "*traidhātukaṃ*" as "the *citta* and *caittas* belonging to the three worlds" (Kochumuttom 2008, 165-166). Hall and Hayes agree that "*traidhātukaṃ*" is an adjective, but take it as a substantive adjective; they find no reason to follow Kochumuttom's choice of specific nouns for it to modify, since Kochumuttom's translation makes the whole sentence "a mere tautology" insofar as it ends up saying something like "the mind that belongs to the three worlds is mind-only." Hence, Hall translates it as "all this [universe] that pertains to the three realms" and Hayes as "what is derived from the three elements" (Hall 1986, 22-23 n. 23, Hayes 1988a, 109-110 n. 61). Despite such differences, all phenomenalist interpreters take "*traidhātukaṃ*" to refer to realms of experience rather than existence: Hall says, "the intention of the *viññapti-mātra*

doctrine is not to draw boundaries around reality but rather to point at the nature of specific experiences” (Hall 1986, 16), Hayes says that “*traidhātukaṃ*” means “the totality of all experience by all beings” (Hayes 1988a, 101), and Lusthaus translates the noun form “*tridhātu*” as “three existential horizons” (Lusthaus 2002, 83).

This epistemological emphasis continues in the phenomenalist interpretation of *viññapti-mātra*. The real disagreement here is on the meaning of only (*mātra*), which Vasubandhu informs us is “for the purpose of the negation of an object” (*arthapratiṣedhārtham*). According to Wayman, this is meant as a “qualified negation” (*paryudāsa pratiṣedha*) in that “the representation differs for the various destinies of men, hungry ghosts, etc.” as opposed to a “simple negation” (*prasajya pratiṣedha*), which would constitute an idealist metaphysical denial of an external object (Wayman 1979, 76). The stock example of a qualified negation – “This is a non-Brahmin” – means that there is a person present who belongs to a different group, whereas the stock example of a simple negation – “It is not the case that this is a Brahmin” – means that there may not be a person present at all; likewise, Wayman thinks that the denial of an object in this case means that the object does not exist in the manner in which it appears to us, but does not deny that there is an object there at all. Hall takes “*viññapti-mātra*” to indicate that the purpose of the text is “to show that the concept of *viññapti* suffices to make sense of perception, and that the concept of an external reference (*artha*) is logically superfluous... when *viññapti* is qualified as ‘*viññapti*-only,’ it cannot be meant as a representation of anything else, especially not of an external object” (Hall 1986, 14).

Likewise, Hayes suggests that “*vijñapti-mātra*” means that “the objective component of experience is being excluded from consideration” (Hayes 1988a, 102).⁷²

The phenomenalist reading of Vasubandhu’s introductory commentary as well as the general thrust of the text is best summed up by Hall:

I would see Vasubandhu’s argument ... as one more attempt to find the Buddhist ‘middle way’ between positive and negative extremes, in this case the extremes of reification and reductionism. ‘Common sense’ takes the objects of perception to be substantial external entities ... Analytical concepts such as atoms or dharmas are powerful tools that can demolish such ‘things,’ but atoms or dharmas can be reified. Vasubandhu’s argument denies the necessity to posit any entities external to perception itself, and rejects, successively, the reification of things, atoms, dharmas, and even *vijñapti* itself. ... *vijñaptis*, in effect, take the place of dharmas in the Abhidharma: as conceptual devices to prevent the reification of objects. The doctrine of *vijñapti-mātra* is not the metaphysical assertion of a transcendental reality consisting of “mind-only.” It is a practical injunction to suspend judgment: ‘Stop at the bare percept; no need to posit any entity behind it.’ (Hall 1986, 17-18)

Phenomenalist interpreters thus see *vijñapti-mātra* as a Buddhist philosophical program of rooting out our tendency to take objects to be as we experience them, because doing so causes suffering insofar as we tend to think of external objects as relatively permanent, substantial things that can lead to happiness. Instead, we should suspend judgment on whether the world is as we experience it, or as King put it, we should “bracket out” this question (King 1995, 168). We should focus on what we do know directly: our own subjective phenomenal experience. On the phenomenalist reading, Vasubandhu is arguing that the *viṣaya* is a cognition, but not that cognitions are all that exist. “*Viṣaya*” can be translated as sense-object or intentional object, but the idea is that it is that thing of which consciousness is directly aware. Vasubandhuan phenomenism simply tells us to focus on how we experience the world, because it’s changing our experience that will

⁷² Other examples of epistemological readings of *vijñapti-mātra* are Kochumuttom 2008, 166, Willis 1979, 34, Lusthaus 2002, 533, and Trivedi 2005, 235.

make a difference, not denying the existence of external objects. Dwelling on the metaphysical question of the reality of the external world is, for a Vasubandhuan phenomenalist, at best irrelevant (it doesn't help to end suffering). At worst it causes suffering (we might become attached to metaphysical theories). On a phenomenalist interpretation, Vasubandhu doesn't think the problem is so much that we think *there are* external objects, but rather *how* we think about what we take to be external objects.

With this in mind, let's move on to the phenomenalist take on Vasubandhu's critique of material theories in *Vimś* 11-15. While Vasubandhu does argue against the metaphysical theories of the Vaibhāṣikas and Vaiśeṣikas, the conclusion of these arguments is that atomic theories and theories positing wholes cannot be established because the theories lead to various absurdities. According to idealist interpreters, to deny the coherence of such material theories would be tantamount to denying the existence of matter and external objects. Phenomenalist interpreters argue that we need not make this assumption. Kochumuttom says that atomism

is only a conceptual image of the world. Such a conceptual image does not guarantee that the world in reality is composed of atoms. ... one cannot consistently argue that the world is composed of (unextended) atoms ... This does not, however, in any case mean that the world is non-existent or illusory. It means only that ordinary human conception is inadequate to reach the world as it is, which is known only to the enlightened ones. (Kochumuttom 2008, 178)

For phenomenalist interpreters, Vasubandhu thinks that atomic theories are problematic and that we should focus on our direct experience rather than engaging in metaphysical speculation about things we cannot experience. Hayes sees the attack on atomism as an extension of the nominalism of the *Abhidharmakośa*, according to which that which does not survive rational analysis must not be ultimately real (Hayes 1988a, 103-104). This

may sound more like the idealist emphasis on metaphysics, but Hayes emphasizes the psychological effects of engaging in metaphysical speculation: “Vasubandhu’s nominalism serves as a safeguard against the developments of the opinions implicit in language that if not guarded against stand as obstacles to *nirvāṇa*” (Hayes 1988a, 104).

Another point some phenomenologists make is that the conclusion as stated in *Vimś* 11 is not “external objects do not exist.” The conclusion is that “**atoms are not established**” (*Vimś* 11), which also rules out the existence of a whole and shows us, contrary to the objection discussed in verse 8, that the Buddha was not speaking literally when he said that material form (*rūpa*) is one of the sense-bases (*āyatana*s). However, none of this quite amounts to saying that matter or external objects do not exist.⁷³ As Kochumuttom points out, Vasubandhu uses the verb “*sidhyati*,” which he translates as “‘to be obtained (in experience),’ ‘to be given (in experience),’ or ‘to be proved to be true’” (Kochumuttom 2008, 180). Furthermore, Vasubandhu says that *atoms* can’t be established, not external reality in general. Vasubandhu could have used the Sanskrit word “*bahyārtha*,” which is literally “external object,” meaning “external to the mind.” In verse 11 and its commentary, however, he uses the word “*viśaya*,” which I translate as “sense-object,” meaning the thing of which we are directly aware in experience. For phenomenologists Vasubandhu’s conclusion simply means that we can’t experience atoms or wholes directly and that we can’t form a rationally adequate theory about them. Kochumuttom describes what he sees as Vasubandhu’s metaphysically agnostic attitude: “Therefore he does not really say that there are no atoms at all, although he is not

⁷³ *paramāṇur na sidhyati* / (*Vimś* 11)

prepared to admit that things-in-themselves which are ineffable, could be conceived in terms of atoms” (Kochumuttom 2008, 180).⁷⁴

In verse 17 and its commentary Vasubandhu gives an analogy between people who wake up to discover what they had dreamed about was false and people who “wake up” to discover the truth of cognition-only. Kochumuttom thinks this analogy means that “the dream-experience is to be taken only as a model towards understanding the entire *saṃsāric* experience” (Kochumuttom 2008, 186). In other words, Vasubandhu is saying that to be in *saṃsāra* (the delusional realm of suffering experienced by unenlightened beings) is like a person who is dreaming without realizing it. Phenomenalist interpreters like Kochumuttom and Hall take it to mean that just as a dreamer experiences things subjectively and indirectly, so do non-enlightened people mistakenly take what they see to be “things-in-themselves” (Kochumuttom 2008, 187) or “external referents” (Hall 1986, 17). This need not be taken as a metaphysical denial of the existence of external objects.⁷⁵

The second type of evidence for a phenomenalist interpretation is that, in addition to the possibility of reconstruing any idealist-sounding passages in phenomenalist terms, there does seem to be some direct textual evidence in support of phenomenism. For instance, Vasubandhu seems to endorse phenomenism in his arguments against the very possibility of directly apprehending an external object. Consider the following argument against the direct perception of external objects:

⁷⁴ Kapstein suggests that “a cogent point-particle theory would mitigate severely the force of Vasubandhu’s argument: as long as such a theory cannot be decisively rejected, Vasubandhu’s ‘proof of idealism’ is, in fact, no proof at all” (Kapstein 1988, 41). While such a mitigating theory is more troublesome for idealist interpretations, it’s also a problem for phenomenalist interpretations because it suggests a way that theorizing about atoms might be a coherent activity despite our lack of direct experience of atoms.

⁷⁵ Furthermore, the objections Vasubandhu raises against *vijñapti-mātra* in *Vimś* 2 could be construed as the concerns of a direct realist about how we could experience objects the way we do, i.e., in certain times and places, inter-subjectively, and with causal efficacy, without *direct* awareness of external objects.

Verse 16: Perceptual cognition is just as in a dream, etc. ... And when this is the case, at that time that object is not seen – how is it thought that there is perception of that object?

And when that perceptual cognition arises and one thinks, “This is my perception,” at that time that object is not seen, because at that time the visual cognition has ceased and the discrimination is only by means of a mental cognition. How could one think that there is a perception of that? And this is the case especially for a momentary sense-object; that [sense-object], which is visible form or taste, etc., ceases at that very moment. (*Vimś* 16)⁷⁶

The key assumption here is the Sautrāntika idea of momentariness, according to which everything that exists only persists for a very short moment. But even if one does not accept that everything is momentary, it makes sense to think that *cognitions* are momentary, and this is all Vasubandhu needs. Here Vasubandhu gives a version of what has been called the “time-lag argument,” which is an argument against direct realism (Robinson 1994, 80-84, Siderits 2007, 133-134, 169). If we had external objects as the direct objects of perception, we could never know it by perception. Vasubandhu points out that by the time one has the mental cognition *that* one is cognizing, the original perceptual cognition has ceased to exist. The mental cognition *that* one is having a visual cognition is not itself a visual cognition, but a reflexive mental state. At best we have a sort of meta-cognition or inference that our perceptual cognitions have external things as their objects, but even if we did have the external world as the direct object of perceptual cognitions, we would never know it. This is a phenomenalist conclusion, because it amounts to the claim that having external objects as direct objects of mental states is impossible.

⁷⁶ *pratyakṣabuddhiḥ svapnādau yathā ... sa ca yadā tadā / na so ‘rtho dr̥ṣyate tasya pratyakṣatvaṃ kathaṃ mataṃ // 16 // yadā ca sā pratyakṣabuddhir bhavaṭīdaṃ me pratyakṣam iti tadā na so ‘rtho dr̥ṣyate manovijñānenaiva paricchedāc cakṣurvijñānasya ca tadā niruddhatvād iti / kathaṃ tasya pratyakṣatvaṃ iṣṭaṃ / viśeṣeṇa tu kṣaṇikasya viśayasya tad idānīṃ niruddham eva tadrupaṃ rasādikaṃ vā / (Vimś 16)*

If the phenomenalist reading of *Vimś* 16 is correct, this would be a natural development from the representational realism that Vasubandhu may have supported as a member of the Sautrāntika school earlier in his career, assuming both that he is the single author of both the *Vimś* and AK and that Sautrāntika held a representational realist theory of perception as is commonly supposed.⁷⁷ As King (1998) suggests, it's easy to see one could move from the representational realist claim that there are external objects that indirectly cause our mental representations, but of which we are not directly aware, to deep concerns about what work these external objects are doing in an epistemological theory. This in turn might lead to a phenomenalist reluctance to say much, if anything, about external objects. Of course, idealists will say Vasubandhu made the leap directly from realism to idealism. But there may have been – appropriately enough – a middle way between these two extremes. The phenomenalist route would have allowed Vasubandhu to suspend judgment on the whole question of external objects.

Vasubandhu seems to express the metaphysically agnostic attitude of phenomenism at the end of the text. In *Vimś* 21d, he introduces the idea that some

⁷⁷ Sautrāntika is usually taken to espouse a form of representational realism by its Brahmanical opponents and by many contemporary scholars (Sinha 1999, Ch. 2, Shastri 1997, 41, Matilal 1986, 249, Hayes 1988a, 98, King 1998, Siderits 2007, 130-137, Ronkin 2011, Sec. 6, Coseru 2011, Sec. 6.5). However, Shastri claims, “The ascription of this view to the Sautrāntika school does not seem to be warranted by any original Buddhist authority” (Shastri 1997, 41 n. 4). Shastri speculates that the confusions of later Brahmanical philosophers relied on a conflation of Sautrāntika with Dignāga (Shastri 1997, 60-65). On the other hand, Matilal cites AK 6.4, in which Vasubandhu distinguishes between conventional and ultimate truth, as part of his argument that Abhidharma philosophers developed something like representationalism (Matilal 1986, 242). Matilal’s idea is that the content of perceptions such as blue patches or “objects” like pots are conventionally existent, and thus lack causal efficacy. Atoms, however, are ultimately existent and therefore are the causes of perception. But since atoms are imperceptible, we are only directly aware of conventionally existent things: “The nominally existent entity being thus devoid of causal efficacy would resemble the intentional object of our awareness, for the intentional objects are claimed to be devoid of causal efficacy in the same way” (Matilal 1986, 248). In opposition to Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika is more properly representationalist, since Vaibhāṣika accepts that sensory phenomena are mind-independent (Matilal 1986, 248-249). Although Coseru refers to the Sautrāntika view as a kind of phenomenism, he gives a similar analysis of the view (Coseru 2011, Sec. 6.5).

kinds of knowledge, such as knowledge of other minds, are within “the scope of a Buddha” (*buddhagocara*). He explains this in the commentary:

Just as that [mind] is within the scope of the Buddhas due to having an inexpressible nature (*nirabhilāpyenātmanā*), in that way, due to ignorance of that [scope of the Buddhas], both of those [i.e., alleged knowledge of one’s own and of others’ minds] are not correct due to the appearance of illusion, because the conceptual construction of grasper and grasped is not abandoned. (*Viṃś 21*)⁷⁸

While we do not have direct knowledge of other minds or external objects, Vasubandhu points out that Buddhas do, although their knowledge is inexpressible. A key difference between our delusional experience and the veridical experience of Buddhas is that our minds overlay our experience with the conceptual imputation of “grasper” (*grāhaka*) and “grasped” (*grāhya*), sometimes translated as subject and object.⁷⁹ From a Buddhist perspective, conceptualizing our experience in terms of grasper and grasped is dangerous because it can imply the existence of a self (*ātman*) who stands apart from the objects of experience. The grasper-grasped dichotomy also creates non-veridical experience: “External things and externality is something the true nature of which is not revealed by our ordinary consciousness alone, which only gives us a picture of things as shaped by and limited to our dualistic mental constructions” (Trivedi 2005, 235). Vasubandhu suggests that only Buddhas, who have eliminated this way of experiencing the world, can truly be said to know the nature of reality.

The end of the text contains what I see as one of the more epistemically modest moments in the history of philosophy in India or elsewhere.

⁷⁸ *yathā tan nirabhilāpyenātmanā buddhānāṃ gocaraḥ/ tathā tad ajñānāt tad ubhayaṃ na yathārthṃ vitathapratibhāstayā grāhyagrāhakavikalpasyāprahīṇatvāt/ (Viṃś 21)*

⁷⁹ Although these terms eventually came to be interpreted as referring to subject-object dualism in favor of idealist views, Jonathan Gold (2006) argues that *grāhaka* and *grāhya* were originally intended to account for features of our perception in which we falsely take there to be a self as opposed to an object.

Verse 22a-c: This establishing of the fact of cognition-only is made by me according to my own ability. But it is not entirely conceivable.

This [fact of cognition-only] can't be thought in all aspects by those similar to me, because reasoning (*tarka*) does not have that as its scope. But in whose scope *is* this complete? To that, it is said:

Verse 22d: It is that which is within the scope of the Buddhas.

Indeed, that [fact of cognition-only] in all aspects is within the scope of the Lords who are Buddhas, because their cognition of all forms and of all knowable objects is not impeded. (*Viṃś* 22)⁸⁰

Phenomenalist interpreters see this as evidence for their interpretation, because it implies that everything Vasubandhu says about cognition-only is merely from the standpoint of ordinary human experience of the world – even if Vasubandhu sometimes sounds like an idealist, such passages can't be taken as a metaphysical description of ultimate reality.⁸¹

Unenlightened beings “can perceive only the unreal forms ... of one's own consciousness” (Kochumuttom 2008, 195). So, is there an external world or not? If Vasubandhuan phenomenism is correct, only a Buddha really knows.

A third type of evidence for a phenomenalist reading is that appeals to Vasubandhu's arguments elsewhere or tradition-wide attitudes can't necessarily be applied to Vasubandhu's *Viṃś*. Just because Vasubandhu uses a form of argument elsewhere for a particular purpose, doesn't mean he used it for that purpose in the *Viṃś*, even if there some parallels in structure. For instance, despite the fact that both

⁸⁰ *vijñaptimātratāsiddhiḥ svaśaktisadrśī mayā/
kṛteyaṃ sarvathā sā tu na cintyā*

sarvaprakārā tu sā mādrśaiścīnayitūṃ na śakyate/ tarkāviṣayatvāt/ kasya punaḥ sā sarvathā gocara ity āha/ buddhagocaraḥ || 22||

buddhānāṃ hi sā bhagavatāṃ sarvaprakāraṃ gocaraḥ sarvākārasarvajñeyānāvighātād iti// (Viṃś 22).

⁸¹ Kochumuttom also sees a kind of modesty in this passage: “is Vasubandhu asking to be excused for any inconsistencies that might have crept into his treatise?” (Kochumuttom 2008, 196). Gold (2011) also argues that metaphysical idealism can't be Vasubandhu's description of ultimate reality, since such reality is supposed to be ineffable. Furthermore, making idealism an ultimate truth would engender the sort of self-referential contradiction pointed to in the commentary to verse 10 of the *Viṃś* in which the non-existence of dharmas would entail the non-existence of cognition-only; instead Gold argues that there are three levels of Vasubandhuan analysis: level one (experience) and level two (causality) are more-or-less idealist, but level three (ultimate reality) is ineffable (Gold 2011, Sec. 5).

Vasubandhu's anti-atomism and anti-theism arguments appeal to absurd consequences, the conclusion in *Vimś* 11 says that atoms can't be *established* (*na sidhyati*), whereas the conclusions of his arguments about the self and a creator God are more obviously stating that such things do not exist. When he refers, in verse 22a-c, to "the establishing of the fact of cognition-only" (*vijñaptimātratāsiddhiḥ*), phenomenalist interpreters would point out that he simply means that he has established that we do not directly perceive external objects. Furthermore, while Vasubandhu does say that the non-existence of the self is known by a lack of direct knowledge of it (AK, p. 431), the ending of the *Vimś* strikes a far more modest tone about the relation between philosophical rationality and ultimate reality than is typically found in Abhidharma.

Although the Indian tradition generally accepted a fuzzy, if non-existent, distinction between metaphysics and epistemology, this doesn't mean that Vasubandhu may not have had a more clearly-defined distinction.⁸² Again, one might look to the distinction made between our knowledge and the knowledge of the Buddhas as something that ought to temper the metaphysical conclusions we draw based on our imperfect, unenlightened experience. Kochumuttom takes this a mark against idealism: "... Vasubandhu did recognize a realm of reality, which is not only independent of the thinking mind, but also is beyond the reach of saṃsāric, empirical knowledge. This admission of reality independent of consciousness is one of the strongest cases for my believing that Vasubandhu was not an idealist" (Kochumuttom 2008, 225). It could also be that other philosophers, such as Nāgārjuna and Dignāga, accepted a sharper distinction

⁸² Lusthaus even claims that epistemology was prior to metaphysics in Indian traditions (Lusthaus 2002, 6). However, I think his claim is slightly off-track, because while many Indian philosophers started with the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), most of them took these means of knowledge as criteria for what actually exists.

between what we can know and what exists, especially if skeptical interpretations of these philosophers are correct.⁸³

The fourth and final type of evidence I will consider is that Vasubandhu's arguments don't support an idealist conclusion as effectively as they support phenomenalism. Here I'll focus on Vasubandhu's main inference, although similar diagnoses could be given of other arguments in the text by showing how construing them in phenomenalist terms makes them more convincing. Some phenomenalist interpreters have alluded to this sort of consideration (e.g., Wayman 1979, 65 and Kochumuttom 2008, 228-231), but the details I present here constitute my own attempt to articulate the idea that Vasubandhu's arguments seem better equipped to support phenomenalism than idealism.

Recall that I characterized the main inference as follows:

Mills's Characterization of Vasubandhu's Main Inference

Thesis (*pratijñā*): This world is cognition-only.

Reason (*hetu*): Because it appears as a non-existent object.

Pervasion (*vyāpti*) and Example (*dr̥ṣṭānta*): Whatever appears as a non-existent object is cognition-only, as in hallucinations and dreams.

Taken as an argument for idealism, "this world" means all of existence and "cognition-only" indicates the unreality of external objects. As explained in section 2.4, something like this inference is the target of parasitism objections according to which the existence

⁸³ I will give my own skeptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna in chapter three, according to which Nāgārjuna's aim is to cultivate non-attachment to philosophical theories rather than use what we can perceive or reason about to establish anything about what exists. Concerning Dignāga, if Hayes's skeptical reading is right, then Dignāga's logical system is not for the purpose of establishing an absolutely certain criterion of reality (which would cement epistemology and metaphysics together), but to reduce our dogmatic tendencies (Hayes 1988a, 158-168). This attitude is similar to Vasubandhu's in *Vimś* 22, "... very few of our judgements in ordinary life pass the standards set by the three characteristics of legitimate evidence. Taken in its strictest interpretation, none of the judgements of any but a fully omniscient being passes" (Hayes 1988a, 167).

of external objects is required for there to be illusory experiences at all.⁸⁴ Feldman notes that the version of the parasitism objection that says illusory cognitions are based on memories of veridical cognitions can be answered if idealists claim that memories, too, are based on illusions (Feldman 2005, 534). However, he thinks another version of the parasitism objection in which “*knowledge* of illusion is parasitic upon knowledge of reality” is more difficult to overcome (Feldman 2005, 535). According to this version, knowing that one is having an illusory experience requires having another experience that one knows is veridical, as in waking from a dream about pus rivers in hell realms to find yourself awake in bed. On this model, the second veridical cognition sublates or overturns the earlier illusory cognition. Uddyotakara argues that the non-awareness of a real object can serve as a reason to deny the existence of external objects only if Yogācāras would allow the awareness of a real object to count as evidence *for* external objects, but doing so runs counter to their conclusion, since they claim that no possible experience could ever reveal the existence of external objects. Hence, their argument is self-contradictory (NV 4.2.33). Using logical terms, this objection states that the example (*dr̥ṣṭānta* – in this case, a hallucination or dream) either does support the pervasion (*vyāpti*), in which case it contradicts the conclusion (*pratijñā*), or it does not support the pervasion, in which case the argument does not establish its conclusion. Feldman considers whether idealist Yogācāras might appeal to the experience of enlightened beings as an example of veridical knowledge that shows idealism to be true; he concludes that unenlightened people don’t have access to this experience (and thus

⁸⁴ Some opponents, however, took the inference to be somewhat different. Kumāriila reports the inference of his Buddhist opponent as follows: “The cognition of a post, etc., is false because it is a cognition (*pratyayatvāt*); for whatever is a cognition is seen to be false, like the cognition of a dream” (Taber’s translation, verse 23, *Nirālambana* chapter, *Ślokavarttika*, Taber 2010, 281). See also Taber 1994.

can't use it as an example), and furthermore, that possessing such experience would eliminate the need for any inference at all (Feldman 2005, 537-540).

If, however, Vasubandhu's inference is construed as an argument for phenomenalism, parasitism objections can be answered more effectively. Vasubandhu is denying that we experience external objects *directly*, but for all we know they still could be – in some indirect causal sense – the metaphysical basis of illusion. Perhaps external objects cause experience in some way, giving us the material with which our minds construct illusions. Parasitism objections, however, could themselves be reconstrued in phenomenalist terms. One could say that some *direct* experience of external objects is required for us to have any illusory experiences. In the memory version of the parasitism objection, a similar response applies: memories are not of directly experiencing external objects, but are themselves memories of directly experiencing cognitions. Uddyotakara's self-contradiction version could be reconstrued to be that we can't know a lack of direct awareness unless we know the presence of direct awareness. The prospects for a phenomenalist response are better than they were for the idealist response. A Vasubandhuan phenomenalist can say that we *do* have a direct awareness available to use as an example: namely, the direct awareness *of cognitions*, which is most clearly exemplified in hallucinations and dreams. Furthermore, it is the continuity of what we normally take to be illusory and veridical experiences that supports the pervasion.

The most compelling reason to see the main inference in phenomenalist terms is that the reason, pervasion, and example simply don't support an idealist conclusion. The appearance of non-existent objects, such as hallucinations and dreams, shows us that the appearances of consciousness need not be appearances of existing objects in all cases, but

it doesn't show that there are no external objects at all. Suppose the pervasion is construed in idealist terms:

Idealist pervasion: Whatever possesses the appearance of non-existent objects is cognition-only, i.e., without any existing external objects.

In this case it's hard to see how Vasubandhu makes the jump from saying that *some* kinds of experience are without any existing external objects to saying that the *entire universe* is without existing external objects. In other words, it's hard to see how the idealist pervasion could be supported without committing a hasty generalization fallacy; for it to be true, it must be possible to generalize from a small sample (our non-veridical experiences) to a large class (the entire universe). Here a Vasubandhuan idealist might object that this is not a hasty generalization: given the continuity of dreaming and waking experiences from within our subjective experience (i.e., the Continuity Principle⁸⁵), Vasubandhu is permitted to claim that waking experiences lack existing external objects in just the same way as dream experiences do. But this commits the fallacy of appeal to ignorance, assuming that the argument is that a lack of direct evidence for external objects implies the non-existence of any external objects anywhere. As parasitism objections suggest, it makes sense to think that we do sometimes dream of objects that we take to exist elsewhere (e.g., dreaming about the Taj Mahal in Albuquerque doesn't mean it doesn't exist in Agra). Idealists haven't ruled out the possibility of external objects existing outside of our illusory cognitions.⁸⁶ If Vasubandhu's inference contains the

⁸⁵ I discussed the Continuity Principle at the end of section 2.3.

⁸⁶ Of course, idealist interpreters would object that Vasubandhu has tried to rule out the possibility of external objects existing anywhere with his attack on material theories. As discussed earlier, however, phenomenalist interpreters read this section epistemologically, so this issue becomes an interpretive question about *Vimś* 11-15 rather than anything to do with the logic of Vasubandhu's main inference.

idealist pervasion explained above, it would be hard to support it without committing an appeal to ignorance.⁸⁷

These problems can be avoided, however, if the inference is construed as an argument for the phenomenalist conclusion that we are only directly aware of cognitions.⁸⁸ Vasubandhu uses the examples of dreams and hallucinations as evidence for the Continuity Principle. The Continuity Principle then supports the pervasion of a phenomenalist inference:

Phenomenalist pervasion: Whatever possesses the appearance of non-existent objects is cognition-only, i.e., does not have external objects as its direct object.

What is continuous between what we consider to be non-veridical and veridical experiences is that there is no direct awareness of external objects in either type of experience. While a Vasubandhuan idealist might try to use the Continuity Principle to support the idealist pervasion, as I argued above I don't think this works. The Continuity Principle concerns features of subjective experience; using this principle to support a pervasion concerning subjective experience (that it lacks direct awareness of external objects) seems more reasonable than jumping to statements concerning reality in general, which would rely on fallacious hasty generalizations or appeals to ignorance. Taken in

⁸⁷ Siderits sees Vasubandhu as an idealist who uses the metaphysical consideration of the principle of lightness to show that idealism is a simpler explanation for our experience than realism (Siderits 2007, Ch.8); Feldman makes a similar point (Feldman 2005, 532). This might make a Vasubandhuan idealist immune to my charges that the idealist version of the main inference relies on a hasty generalization and an appeal to ignorance, but it's worth noting that Vasubandhu himself never mentions the principle of lightness. Perhaps phenomenism is a lighter interpretation of the text, because you don't have to bring in the principle of lightness!

⁸⁸ The two versions also have different subjects (*pakṣas*): the subject of the idealist inference is existence in general (or, more technically, those things alleged to be external objects) while the subject of the phenomenalist inference is human experience (or, more technically, those experiences alleged to be direct experiences of external objects). The more technical sense in each case comes from the fact that "the example cannot come from within the inferential subject" (Feldman 2005, 530); the example (*dr̥ṣṭānta*) of illusory experiences can't be a part of the subject (*pakṣa*), which is either existence in general or human experience in general (because the example must be non-controversial), but the subject could come from a class of allegedly-existent or allegedly-experienced things.

the phenomenalist sense, the examples are not meant to show that the objects of all experiences are necessarily non-existent, but rather to show that all experiences, even if they are veridical, have cognitions as their direct objects, just as in the case of hallucinations and dreams. The examples of hallucinations and dreams are supposed to give uncontroversial cases in which we lack *direct* awareness of external objects, because everyone agrees that such experiences are non-veridical. The feature of these examples that Vasubandhu's argument points to is a lack of having external objects as *direct* objects, not the fact that illusory experiences lack any corresponding external object. Vasubandhu then uses these non-controversial examples to argue that all the cognitions we take to be veridical likewise lack any direct awareness of external objects. This is why he goes to such lengths to support the subjective continuity of dreaming and waking experience; he does not do so because he is denying the existence of external objects (although phenomenalist interpreters don't think he's giving any positive argument *for* external objects, either). Thus, phenomenalist interpreters might argue that construing the argument in phenomenalist terms is preferable. Scaling back the conclusion so that it's a more modest epistemological point rather than a far-reaching metaphysical point allows us to be more charitable to Vasubandhu. We can attribute to him a conclusion that his premises more adequately support.⁸⁹

An important objection to the preceding argument for a phenomenalist interpretation is that the argument I have been calling Vasubandhu's main inference was

⁸⁹ This is not to say that a phenomenalist inference is perfect. It still has to answer objections to the Continuity Principle itself. Like many direct realists today, many opponents of Yogācāra (e.g., Vātsyāyana, Kumāriḷa, Śāṅkara, etc.) deny that the subjective feel or content of dream and waking experiences really are the same. Furthermore, Stephen Phillips and Matthew Dasti have recently argued that Nyāya endorses a kind of epistemological disjunctivism according to which veridical and illusory cognitions are simply *different kinds* of mental states (see Phillips 2012, 41 and Dasti 2012, 9-10).

not meant to be a proper inference (*anumāna*) in terms of the canons of Indian logic; thus, the analysis just given is off track, since it takes verse one to present a formal inference when in fact it is something more like a thesis statement telling us what Vasubandhu intends to argue for throughout the text. For instance, the analysis of the *Vimś* given by Taber and Kellner (2012) starts by denying that *Vimś* 1 constitutes a formal *anumāna*. Taber and Kellner agree with recent work by Jürgen Hanneder (2007) who “has convincingly argued that this verse, which is missing from one of the Tibetan translations of the text and from Hsüan Tsang’s Chinese translation but corresponds to prose passages in both, may actually have been fashioned from a prose statement of the original Sanskrit version when a *kārikā*-only text was composed” (Taber and Kellner 2012, 21). They take this state of affairs to indicate that

it does not appear that it [verse one] intends to present a formal *anumāna* that would establish the character of “this” as “mere cognition,” as proper *anumānas* would. Rather, it simply mentions another fact in support of the claim that “this” is mere cognition, namely, that we sometimes have cognitions of objects that do not exist. The idea seems to be ... that all of our cognitions are structurally indistinguishable from ones in which we are presented with non-existent objects. Therefore, we are justified in regarding *all* cognition in the same way, as mere cognition without an object. Now, since this is so weak an argument as not to be considered really an argument at all, it seems most appropriate to interpret this initial statement not as any kind of proof, but rather simply as a statement of the *thesis* to be proved in the treatise to follow, together with a *prima facie* rationale for it. The actual proof of the thesis ... will be of a much less direct nature. (Taber and Kellner 2012, 22)

So, according to this line of interpretation, the issues I have pointed out with regard to what I am calling Vasubandhu’s main inference may be there, but this isn’t really a problem for Vasubandhuan idealism, since verse one was never intended as a formal *anumāna* in the first place. Although I have claimed that a phenomenalist reading is

more charitable to Vasubandhu, it is in fact most charitable to attribute to him the overall *anupalabdhi* argument as Taber and Kellner see it.

My response to this objection comes in two stages. First, I think Taber and Kellner make their own assumptions about what Vasubandhu's final conclusion is. Second, a phenomenalist interpretation can make sense of the text without making these assumptions even if verse one does not present a formal *anumāna*.

Taber and Kellner say that their approach begins, "Taking as our hypothesis that Vasubandhu is denying the existence of objects outside of consciousness in the *Vimśikā*..." (Taber and Kellner 2012, 9). Of course, there's nothing wrong with this approach in itself. Since Vasubandhu isn't always explicit about his reasoning or his conclusions, it makes sense to test various hypotheses. Taber and Kellner have tested the idealist hypothesis and found that it makes good sense of the text. I would simply point out that this procedure relies on two key assumptions: that the text has an idealist conclusion and, more fundamentally, that Vasubandhu does not offer what he takes to be definitive reasons for his conclusion in the text. Again, there's nothing inherently problematic in this approach, but could we make sense of the text without relying on these assumptions? I think a phenomenalist interpretation could do so.

Even if *Vimś* 1 doesn't present a formal *anumāna*, a phenomenalist interpretation can be defended. First of all, a phenomenalist interpretation doesn't rely on taking *Vimś* 1 as an *anumāna*; I merely used that as one example such that if it is an *anumāna*, it makes more sense in phenomenalist terms, but as I pointed out earlier in this section, a phenomenalist interpretation can make sense of other parts of the text as well, such as verses 16-17 and 21-22. On a phenomenalist reading, the structure of the *Vimś* would be

something like this: verse one gives a general argument (either an *anumāna* or not) or maybe a sort of thesis statement, verses two through seven respond to initial objections based on reasoning, verses eight through fifteen show that the Buddha's words seemingly advocating direct realism are not to be taken literally and that material theories about things we don't experience are not profitable, verses 16-17 give a phenomenalist account of perception, verses 18-20 respond to more reason-based objections, and verses 21-22 explain the status of Vasubandhu's thesis.

The main advantage of a phenomenalist interpretation is that it allows us to say that Vasubandhu really did intend to present strong arguments for his thesis in the *Vimś*. Taber and Kellner claim that there is a paradox at the end of the text.

Thus, we find Vasubandhu stating a paradox with this last verse: he has established mere-cognition "according to his abilities," yet it is not something that can be established by means of rational argument. The tension of this paradox is reduced, however, if we can see that Vasubandhu has not attempted to establish mere-cognition directly. Rather, by dispelling all objections to his thesis, by showing in effect that there is no evidence that establishes the opposite thesis that our cognitions are caused by objects outside our minds, we are left with mere-cognition as the only remaining alternative. (Taber and Kellner 2012, 34)

On a phenomenalist reading, however, Vasubandhu wasn't modest in verses 21-22 because he was refraining from drawing his ultimate conclusion; rather, he was modest because the conclusion for which he does argue is itself a more modest claim than idealism. If we take *vijñapti-mātra* in the phenomenalist sense of simply denying that we have external objects as the direct objects of perception, then it would be charitable to think that Vasubandhu saw his arguments in the *Vimś* as offering strong support for phenomenism. Furthermore, on a phenomenalist reading of Vasubandhu's statement, "This [fact of cognition-only] can't be thought in all aspects by those similar to me,

because reasoning (*tarka*) does not have that as its scope” (*Vimś* 22), would mean that the type of reasoning available to us isn’t effective beyond our experience. That is, the fact of cognition-only does not by itself tell normal human beings anything about the ontological status of external objects, but it does answer such questions for a Buddha (or so Vasubandhu claims in 22d).

Whether Vasubandhu saw his arguments as anything like deductive arguments is hard to say, but even if his arguments are abductive it makes for a stronger abductive argument to argue for a weaker conclusion. For example, if I were to argue that the best explanation for my toaster not working is that the particular outlet it’s plugged into is not receiving electricity, this would be an easier conclusion to support with the available evidence than the conclusion that the power plant has stopped producing electricity for my whole neighborhood – although both conclusions may be compatible with the evidence, the first is much easier to support with the evidence at hand. Likewise, phenomenalist and idealist conclusions are both compatible with the textual evidence at hand (that’s the source of all this trouble, after all!). However, a phenomenalist conclusion may be preferable in as much as it is a weaker epistemological claim about human perception rather than a stronger metaphysical claim about all of reality. A phenomenalist conclusion is easier to support even if *Vimś* 1 does not contain a formal *anumāna* or even if the text as a whole is a kind of *anupalabdhi* argument. In the latter case, a phenomenalist interpreter might even take the argument to be that none of the *pramāṇas* establish direct realism or representational realism while simultaneously holding that they do not establish idealism, either; again, Vasubandhuan phenomenism would be the epistemological middle way between realism and idealism. Thus, phenomenist

interpreters might still claim that their interpretation is more charitable whatever Vasubandhu's form of reasoning may be.

2.6 A tentative answer

Having presented what I see as the best evidence for both idealist and phenomenalist interpretations of Vasubandhu, in this section I'll evaluate this evidence and come to my own conclusion. While I admit that Vasubandhu *could have been* an idealist, I argue that it's likely that Vasubandhu was a phenomenalist, and – even if he was an idealist – he *should have been* a phenomenalist.

In claiming that Vasubandhu either was a phenomenalist or at the very least should have been one, I am not making any claims about the Yogācāra tradition as a whole. It's possible that Vasubandhu was a phenomenalist, but that later philosophers strongly influenced by the Yogācāra tradition really were idealists (e.g., Sthiramati, Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, Ratnakīrti, etc.). Also, most of the opponents of Yogācāra in India, Tibet, and East Asia seem to have taken the school as a form of metaphysical idealism. Janice Willis, a proponent of a phenomenalist interpretation of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, proposes that Vasubandhu's earlier phenomenalist strand of Yogācāra was opposed to a later idealist strand, which was exemplified by Dharmapāla and Hsüang-tsang (Willis 1979, 21).⁹⁰ I'm not going to evaluate this historical claim here, but it does give an alternative to the narrative that Yogācāra was always idealist from the time of Vasubandhu.

⁹⁰ Anacker gives a similar, though less developed, explanation (Anacker 2005, 159).

The most important point to arise from my discussion is that the direct textual evidence can be interpreted either way, as demonstrated by the first kind of evidence given for each interpretation. This is what makes reading the *Vimś* such a tricky business: neither interpretation is uniquely supported by the text itself at the expense of the other. Since both interpretations can be made to fit with the text, interpreters usually turn to other considerations. In reviewing these considerations, I find the last type of evidence for phenomenalism to be the most persuasive: Vasubandhu's arguments simply offer better support for phenomenalism than idealism. Does this prove that Vasubandhu was a phenomenalist? Of course not. It's still entirely possible that Vasubandhu was an idealist. Perhaps I have misunderstood his arguments. Maybe the flaws I identified are there, but he simply didn't notice them. Nonetheless, an examination of the evidence has led me to believe that there are reasons to lean in favor of a phenomenalist interpretation.

Other points in favor of a phenomenalist reading are that there are plausible phenomenalist responses to each of the main points in favor of the idealist interpretation: idealist-sounding language can be reconstrued phenomenally, Vasubandhu's opponents could have misread him, his arguments elsewhere don't necessarily share the same structure as his arguments in the *Vimś*, and Vasubandhu may have allowed for more of a distinction between epistemology and metaphysics than many other classical Indian philosophers. While none of these reasons are definitive, I think they can, as Kochumuttom says of his arguments, be taken as "an invitation to a re-evaluation of the traditional interpretation rather than a categorical rejection of it" (Kochumuttom 2008, *xvi*).

My conclusion is best expressed by saying that if Vasubandhu was not a phenomenalist, he *should have been*. While the *Vimś* makes sense as an idealist text, its arguments are stronger if they are taken as attempting to support phenomenalism. Nonetheless, my conclusion remains tentative, because there's not enough textual evidence to say what Vasubandhu actually intended. Vasubandhu could have been an idealist who simply failed to give thoroughly convincing arguments (which would in no way diminish his status as a great philosopher) or he may have been phenomenalist who was, for whatever reason⁹¹, consistently misread both by later members of his own tradition and their opponents (which has also been the fate of many great philosophers).

2.7 Vasubandhu and the intuitive thesis

Whether ultimately idealist or phenomenalist, Vasubandhu supports a theory of perception in which the direct objects of perception are mental phenomena rather than external objects. If Vasubandhu is an idealist, then we have an example of a dream argument that leads to some sort of sense-data theory without leading to a fully skeptical concern, since idealism is the metaphysical assertion that all reality is mental while skepticism is the view that we do not know whether external objects exist. In this case, Vasubandhu provides a counter-example to the claims made by Rorty and Dewey that epistemological theories that start by focusing on the relation between sense-data and external objects will lead to the problem of skepticism.⁹² If Vasubandhu is a

⁹¹ My speculation is that the fuzzy distinction between metaphysics and epistemology in the larger Indian tradition perhaps made it easy for classical Indian philosophers to mistake phenomenalism for idealism.

⁹² I think Dewey and Rorty both make a mistake described by Robinson: "Commentators are prone to talk as if holding to an intentional notion of ideas in general saves one from the 'mistake' of treating sensory contents as sense-data. This is not so, for they might have retained a notion of intentionality and yet it may only be a property of thought, not of sensation" (Robinson 1994, 14).

phenomenalist, as I suggest, then there is, if not exactly skeptical concerns, certainly a standing invitation to skeptical concerns, since nothing inside our conscious experience can possibly tell us whether there are external objects or not. Phenomenalism is not a full-fledged concern with the problem of skepticism, since a phenomenalist might maintain that our phenomenal experience *just is* what it is to experience external objects, as Mill and many 20th century phenomenologists did, or phenomenologists could take representational realist or idealist routes, both of which are compatible with what I have characterized as a basic phenomenalist position. Vasubandhu never explicitly rules out forms of idealism or representational idealism that are compatible with his phenomenism; whether the epistemic modesty of verses 21-22 would effectively rule out these options remains an open question, at least on the basis of textual evidence. However, once one begins to question whether we experience external objects directly, skeptical concerns are simply a few steps away: phenomenologists who have already ruled out direct realism could come to a full-fledged skeptical concern by denying that we could establish idealist and representational realist alternatives, leaving us perhaps unable to establish any source of knowledge about the external world. It's also worth noting that, while Vasubandhu's phenomenism constitutes an invitation to skeptical problems, Indian philosophers didn't *accept* this invitation with the vigor of post-Cartesian Western philosophers. At most we have classical Indian "proto-Humeans" rather than Humeans or New Humeans.

Although my results here do not offer clean, direct confirmation of the intuitive thesis in which one finds a precise analogue of the Cartesian problematic in classical India, neither do these results support strong rejections of the intuitive thesis. Contrary to

therapeutic diagnoses of skepticism in which skeptical problems reflect mistakes about the meaning of skeptical arguments due to philosophical confusions in the Western tradition, something quite close to skeptical arguments made sense to some Indian philosophers.⁹³ Contrary to diagnoses offered by Dewey and Rorty, Indian philosophy developed something like sense-data theories without developing precisely the same skeptical problem. Also, since *pramāṇa* theories are general principles of knowledge, there is something very much like Williams's epistemological realism in classical India, but these theories did not lead to the problem of external-world skepticism. This suggests that Williams is simply wrong when he claims that epistemological realism is the primary source of skeptical concerns. My results show that the issue of skepticism is too complicated to be either obviously intuitive or easily diagnosed.⁹⁴

Nonetheless, I think my results offer partial support for the intuitive thesis. The type of reasoning that often – although not *always* – leads to skeptical issues in epistemology can be found in a philosopher temporally and culturally quite remote from the rise of skeptical epistemology in 17th century Europe. One important ingredient of this type of thinking is the questioning of what M. F. Burnyeat has called “the realist assumption” or the assumption that there is an external world with which we interact directly (Burnyeat 1982, 40). Vasubandhuan versions of both idealism and phenomenalism question this assumption, although idealism answers this question in claiming that there is no external world. Thus, Burnyeat is quite simply wrong when he says, “... Descartes' hyperbolic doubt ... brought into the open and questioned *for the*

⁹³ Granted, Indian philosophers may be in need of a therapeutic diagnosis as much as Western philosophers.

⁹⁴ I suspect that all one really needs for skepticism is some vague distinction between “getting it right” and “getting it wrong” and a situation in which one cannot in principle tell the difference. This could be a necessary, but not sufficient condition. The problem with many theoretical diagnoses may be that they want to provide both necessary and sufficient conditions for skepticism.

first time the realist assumption...” (Burnyeat 1982, 40, italics added). Vasubandhu had questioned this assumption about 1,200 years earlier.⁹⁵ It may be that Vasubandhu made similar mistakes and had similar presuppositions as his later European counterparts. However, I think Vasubandhu merely thought carefully about human experience and our relation to the world; in doing epistemology, similar epistemological questions arose. If it is a mistake to ask such questions, then such mistakes are not limited to Western philosophers. Human nature may or may not contain the propensity to ask skeptical questions, but the history of Indian philosophy shows that the possibility is there, given the right conditions. Thus, there does seem to be some evidence for the thesis that skepticism is an intuitive problem.

Some might object that phenomenalism as it was developed by philosophers such as Mill and Ayer was supposed to be an *alternative* to skepticism, so I have mischaracterized phenomenalism as a quasi-skeptical theory. I agree with Laurence Bonjour that phenomenalism’s refusal to give an explanation for the regularity of experience that goes beyond sense-data is itself moving toward skepticism: “Perhaps ... the phenomenalist is right that we cannot ever know that any such explanation is correct; but this, if so, seems to constitute an argument for *skepticism* about the material world, not a justification for perversely reinterpreting the meaning or content of claims about material objects” (Bonjour 2011, Sec. 2.1). Claiming that our concepts of external objects are entirely constructed in sense-data terms leaves open the question of whether there are any objects beyond our sense-data, which is just a roundabout way of arguing for skepticism about external objects. Granted, Vasubandhu gives an explanation for the

⁹⁵ Some scholars of ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy disagree with Burnyeat and claim this assumption was questioned in ancient Western thought. See footnote 98 for some examples.

regularity of experience in terms of *karma*, but this explanation would work whether or not there are external objects, because even if they do exist, the *manner* in which we experience external objects is determined by *karma*, which causes us to superimpose subject-object dualism on our experience. Until we become enlightened, we can never see things as they really are.

As further evidence of Vasubandhu's quasi-skeptical considerations, consider some interesting parallels between the *Vimś* and Descartes's *Meditations*. Both philosophers begin by raising problems for our pre-theoretical version of direct realism that we experience reality more-or-less as it really is. Each philosopher does so by contrasting our direct knowledge of subjective mental states with what turns out to be rather sketchy prospects for our knowledge of external objects, a move some contemporary philosophers such as Timothy Williamson take to be essential to skepticism (Williamson 2000, Ch. 8).⁹⁶ Likewise, both philosophers try to answer the problems they raise. Of course, the answer Vasubandhu gives to his skeptical problem is quite different than Descartes's. According to Descartes, all you need is the proverbial stove-heated room and six days of meditations on the nature of knowledge, God, error, the self, and the external world. For Vasubandhu, you may need many lifetimes of

⁹⁶ Williamson uses this feature of Cartesian skepticism in his diagnosis of skepticism: "... sceptical arguments may go wrong by assuming too *much* knowledge; by sacrificing something in self-knowledge to the sceptic, we stand to gain far more in knowledge of the world" (Williamson 2000, 164). While interesting, I don't think Williamson's diagnosis is convincing. First, it relies on an externalist notion of evidence and knowledge according to which we may know things about the world without knowing that we know, which – even if it works – is no more satisfactory than other externalist responses to skepticism. Second, I don't share his assumption that external-world skepticism *requires* luminous self-knowledge, even if many of the historical precedents for external-world skepticism such as Descartes and perhaps Hume accepted it. In fact, I find Williamson's diagnosis a great deal *more skeptical*, since, if he's right, we know that we know neither our own appearances nor facts about the world. Williamson's view might even be compatible with Pyrrhonism: "Being moved by the way things appear requires no commitment to the nature of mental states, or the mechanics of human perception and behaviour, as long as she [the Pyrrhonist] does not take it to be true that she is so affected" (Thorsrud 2009, 183). Dodd (2007) gives a very different argument for a similar conclusion that Williamson should be a skeptic. For an interesting comparison of Williamson and Buddhist (especially Tibetan) epistemology, see Stoltz 2007.

meditations on the same topics, albeit with very different answers (especially on the self and God). Descartes recovers most of his beliefs at the end of the process, and it turns out we're not massively deluded. Vasubandhu tells us that we in fact do not know how things really are (although he's modest about what that knowledge actually looks like); if you want to know how things really are, you need to become a Buddha, which is no small task. Descartes's "project of pure inquiry" (B. Williams 1978) has a primarily theoretical aim, although I think many contemporary philosophers overlook the practical benefits the *Meditations* aims to provide: to make you feel secure in your cognitive life and to provide a firm intellectual foundation for the scientific revolution. Vasubandhu's project is both theoretical and practical: the practical goal of ending suffering is reached by overcoming our theoretical error of taking our dualistic perceptions of subject and object to represent reality. In one way Vasubandhu is more of a skeptic than Descartes: we never know reality as long as we remain normal human beings. But is Vasubandhu any different from other classical Indian philosophers who are similarly committed to paths of radical transformation? I think he is. Vasubandhu tells us a lot less than other classical Indian philosophers about what the true nature of things really is, but he tells us a lot about why we don't know what reality is like. I doubt contemporary epistemologists would find Vasubandhu's answer any more convincing than they find Descartes's, but if I am right Vasubandhu developed similar skeptical considerations.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ There are, of course, significant differences as well. For instance, while Vasubandhu presents a dream analogy in *Vimś* 17, he never explicitly suggests that the reader could be dreaming right now.

Although there's some debate about whether Pyrrhonists developed something resembling skepticism about the external world⁹⁸, it's worth noting that the problem of external world skepticism did not arrive in its full contemporary form in Western philosophy until the seventeenth century. If the history of philosophy had played out differently in India, I think the quasi-skeptical considerations of Vasubandhu could have likewise developed into something we would recognize as the problem of external-world skepticism.

But as things actually turned out, neither Indian philosophers akin to Pyrrhonists, such as Nāgārjuna, or philosophers closer to what modern Westerners think of as skeptics, such as Vasubandhu, created strands of skepticism that became the basis of concerns that were actively pursued by the majority of classical Indian philosophers. And why is this? In a nutshell, nobody really knows. My speculation is that it may have been the predominance of realism and causal theories of perception that led most classical Indian philosophers away from a serious concern with skepticism. The Nyāya school was particularly influential, especially in their early refutation of Nāgārjuna-like skepticism (NS 2.1.8-15), which claimed that skeptical doubts are self-refuting, and in their direct realism, which claimed that perception is caused directly by external objects. The popularity of Nyāya and schools influenced by them may have made skeptical problems less attractive to the majority of classical Indian philosophers. Matthew Dasti points out how the self-refutation objections worked alongside direct realism to help Nyāya avoid skeptical problems:

⁹⁸ Burnyeat (1982) argues that there was nothing at all like external-world skepticism in Pyrrhonism, while Fine (2003) argues that there was something similar. A clear discussion of the matter can be found in Thorsrud 2009, 182-183.

Naiyāyikas did not attempt to stand outside the deliverances of *pramāṇas* in order to critique them. As adverted to repeatedly in the *sūtras*, such is not possible, as one would lose the very resources for rational reflection altogether. Rather, Nyāya articulates a theory of default trust in *pramāṇas* and critiques individual cognitions as the need arises. As attacks are marshaled against the *pramāṇa* system, the Naiyāyikas' dialectical position is that they need only rebut such challenges or indicate that somehow the challenger is subtly relying on *pramāṇas*, though without acknowledging it, and is thus guilty of self-referential incoherence. Default trust in cognition and a fundamental realism are thus woven together in a host of arguments that appeal to parasitism of various kinds. (Dasti 2012, 8)

Many epistemic externalists today claim to gain traction against skepticism by making knowledge primarily a matter of relations between knowers and the world rather than anything involving knowers' relations to their mental states; likewise, some recent scholars have suggested that a kind of causal theory of knowledge or epistemic externalism was present in Nyāya epistemology and that this helped make skepticism a less serious issue for Naiyāyikas.⁹⁹ Matilal quite plausibly suggests that Nyāya accepts a causal theory of knowledge similar to that of Alvin Goldman (Matilal 1986, 106 n. 13). Stephen Phillips sees what he calls "two levels to the Nyāya theory, *pramā*, raw animal knowledge, so to say, and knowledge self-consciously certified, *nirṇaya* and *siddhānta*" (Phillips 2012, 5). According to Phillips, the first kind of knowledge is a purely causal, externalist variety of knowledge while the second is an internalist variety that requires a knower to have access to reasons. While Nyāya blends externalist and internalist elements, even reflective knowledge is ultimately causally dependent on the more basic form of knowledge (Phillips 2012, 13-15). Dasti furthermore sees Nyāya as a precursor to contemporary disjunctivism, which is the view that, contrary to the Continuity

⁹⁹ Stoltz (2007) argues that there are strong externalist tendencies in Indian and Tibetan epistemology at least with regard to externalism about mental content. For Stoltz, this gives evidence that many Indian and Tibetan epistemologists had a position similar to Timothy Williamson's externalist conception of knowledge as a factive mental state.

Principle, illusory and veridical cognitions are fundamentally different kinds of mental states (Dasti 2012, 9-10).¹⁰⁰ All of this allows Nyāya to combine the sorts of parasitism arguments mentioned earlier with a robust realism to head off serious skeptical doubts at the source.

While the above considerations may have made it difficult for the realist camps to take skepticism seriously, later developments in idealism (such as Advaita Vedānta and later Yogācāra) would squeeze out skepticism from the other side by making knowledge ultimately a purely internal affair.¹⁰¹ As I have argued, there's no necessity in the jump from phenomenalism to idealism, as the two are logically distinct positions. Nonetheless, many philosophers in India and the West have made this leap, bounding over a skeptical position in the process. For Advaita, the leap was from realism to monistic idealism, which was perhaps a way to make sense of Upaniṣadic visions of unity. For Yogācāra idealists later in the tradition, I suspect idealism was a way to understand the non-dualism of subject and object with consciousness, which is immediately known, given the upper hand.

Where then does this leave the phenomenalist reading of Vasubandhu? If I am right, Vasubandhu developed phenomenalism as he pursued epistemological questions. Such phenomenalism *could have* developed into external-world skepticism. That it did

¹⁰⁰ Dasti claims, "... that the Nyāya position exists at all is useful for contemporary disjunctivism, as it gives support to the contention that disjunctivism need not be seen as a mere reaction. It may be motivated independently, as seen in a tradition never set against a dominant Cartesianism, but ever ready to challenge its presuppositions" (Dasti 2012, 10). I think this is a bit hasty, since Nyāya *was* in fact responding to skeptical challenges to the whole *pramāṇa* enterprise from Madhyamaka and phenomenalist or idealist challenges from Yogācāra that included arguments for something like the Continuity Principle. Nonetheless, Dasti is right that nothing quite like Cartesian-style skepticism ever gained much traction in classical India.

¹⁰¹ I don't mean to say that Advaita Vedānta and later Yogācāra idealism exemplify the same kind of idealism. Advaita's "internal" account of knowledge only holds for ultimate knowledge of *brahman* as pure consciousness, since, I mentioned in sections 2.4 and 2.5, Śāṅkara rejects Yogācāra's analysis of everyday experience as purely subjective.

not do so is a fascinating story, both in the history of philosophy and for our epistemological concerns today.

2.8 Epistemological skepticism and metaphilosophical skepticism

Talk of external-world skepticism aside, aren't there skeptical concerns in Indian philosophy? Isn't there something quite skeptical about philosophers such as Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi? For instance, Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi both offer sustained critiques of the epistemological theories of several schools. Even if these philosophers don't specifically discuss doubts about our knowledge of the external world, they do nonetheless seem to be cultivating some sort of skeptical attitude. Likewise, foundational texts of decidedly non-skeptical schools demonstrate a concern about skepticism; a clear example can be found in the parts of the *Nyāyasūtra* in which Gautama considers and rejects serious doubts about the project of establishing the means of knowledge (NS 2.1.8-18).

Perhaps this is not a concern about external-world skepticism, but rather a concern about skepticism of some other kind. Understanding this situation will require an expansion of our skeptical vocabulary. While nothing precisely like the issue of external world skepticism developed in classical India, there is another category of skeptical issues that I think *is* clearly exemplified in classical Indian philosophy. This is skepticism about philosophy itself, or as I call it, metaphilosophical skepticism. My definition of metaphilosophical skepticism is: "an attitude of sustained doubt, based on self-reflexive philosophical arguments, about the possibility of achieving the aims of philosophy or the desirability of philosophical pursuits, where 'philosophy' typically refers to characterizations of philosophical beliefs, knowledge-claims, or attitudes as

presented by other philosophers.” Metaphilosophical skepticism is not as strange as it sounds. It is found in Hume’s lamentations at the end of book one of the *Treatise* and with a therapeutic element in the later Wittgenstein; it may even be found in Rorty’s doubts about ahistorical philosophical rationality. In Western philosophy, the clearest example of metaphilosophical skepticism is Pyrrhonism, which, as Robert Fogelin argues, “uses self-refuting philosophical arguments, taking philosophy as its target” (Fogelin 1994, 3).

It is helpful to contrast metaphilosophical skepticism with skepticism about the external world. One feature of external world skepticism is that our allegedly innocent conception of knowledge is itself never challenged. Philosophers are assumed to have captured the truth of human epistemic practice, or at least *ideal* epistemic practice. External-world skepticism simply shows that our concept of knowledge surprises us by failing to apply in the most banal circumstances. Thus, it is a form of epistemological skepticism, using epistemological concepts to deny actual knowledge.

Metaphilosophical skeptics see things differently. While external-world skeptics claim that no one really knows anything about the external world, metaphilosophical skeptics might focus on whether the philosophical conception of knowledge is itself defective. In some sense, this sort of questioning has led to industries in the analysis of concepts of knowledge, both in Western and Indian epistemology. But a metaphilosophical skeptic might then wonder how we can expect such analysis to be successful, or whether a complete philosophical analysis is desirable or even possible. It is such doubts about the possibility or desirability of philosophy itself that distinguishes metaphilosophical skepticism from external-world skepticism and other kinds of

epistemological skepticism.¹⁰² What makes metaphilosophical skepticism philosophical as opposed to say, a more mundane rejection of philosophy based on its quotidian uselessness, is that these doubts are based on philosophical arguments. Strange as it may seem, metaphilosophical skeptics seek to bring philosophy into witness against itself. That is, they use philosophy to undo the impulse to philosophize.¹⁰³

To clarify what I mean by metaphilosophical skepticism, it will help to present a brief account of my interpretation of the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus. Pyrrhonism is a way of life with the goal of suspension of judgment (*epoche*), which brings about tranquility (*ataraxia*). Sextus's arguments are offered, not as statements of fact or hurdles toward a later assertion, but as medicine intended to cure those distressed by dogmatic beliefs (PH 3.32). There are three main points of my interpretation of Sextus: first, Sextus's target is belief rather than knowledge, second, Sextus's Pyrrhonism is entirely practical, having no theoretical commitments whatsoever, and third, when Sextus discusses epistemological questions he is not putting forward an epistemological theory, but rather he "extends *epochē* into epistemology itself" (Williams 1988, 586). It is in these senses that I think Sextus can be profitably read as a radical metaphilosophical

¹⁰² A good example of this distinction is Peter Unger's extreme skepticism in his book *Ignorance*. Unger argues that nobody actually knows anything and claims that philosophy might prove itself useful in reformatting our language in light of this fact. Despite his pessimism about knowledge, his optimism about philosophy itself never dims (Unger 1975). While metaphilosophical skepticism is usually opposed to epistemological skepticism, it is possible to be a metaphilosophical skeptic on the basis of epistemological concepts; Hume, for example, is thrown into extreme doubt about philosophy *because* he has shown that basic philosophical concepts do not meet his epistemological standards (Hume *Treatise* 1.4.7).

¹⁰³ One may also wonder how this differs from "antiphilosophy" as discussed in conjunction with Nietzsche, Rorty, Zen thinkers, or others. Lawrence Cahoon, for instance, refers to Sextus, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Rorty as anti-philosophers (Cahoon 1994, 204). There may be some overlap between these notions, and some philosophers may find their way onto both lists. Sextus and Jayarāsi are less dramatic than Nietzsche and more argument-oriented than Zen, but some sort of rejection of traditional philosophy seems to be present in all these areas. Whatever differences there might be between metaphilosophical skepticism and antiphilosophy are probably more in the methods employed than in the goals sought.

skeptic.¹⁰⁴ In what follows, I will primarily discuss metaphilosophical skepticism in its more radical form, although I will briefly touch on more mitigated varieties as well.

At this point, one might ask how metaphilosophical skeptics define “philosophy.” After all, they seem to need some relatively precise idea of what it is that they are denying. Why not say that Kant is a metaphilosophical skeptic, since he denies philosophy of a certain type, namely, the metaphysical speculations of Wolff and Leibniz? How can the category of metaphilosophical skepticism make sense if we don’t have any precise idea of what it is that such skeptics are so keen to criticize?

The difficulty in answering this question is that metaphilosophical skeptics, if I’m right, don’t have their own definitions of philosophy. They remain parasitic on whatever is thought of as philosophy in their particular time and place. That is, metaphilosophical skeptics define “philosophy” dialectically based on their opponents’ views. Hence, Sextus’s main targets are Stoics, Epicureans, and Aristotelians, Nāgārjuna’s targets are generally Ābhīdharmikas and Naiyāyikas, and Jayarāśi’s targets are Naiyāyikas, Mīmāṃsākas, Buddhists, and indeed almost all schools of classical Indian philosophy. Metaphilosophical skeptics themselves do not put forward a theory about what philosophy really is.

To give an example of this parasitic method of defining the target of metaphilosophical skepticism, let’s look at Sextus Empiricus. While Sextus doesn’t put forward his own definition of philosophy, he does tell us that he relies on the Stoics’ idea that philosophy consists of three parts.

¹⁰⁴ My interpretation of Sextus is based primarily on his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (PH). I have also found the following contemporary works to be helpful: Hankinson 1995, Annas and Barnes 1985, Annas and Barnes 2000, Fogelin 1994, Fogelin 2003, Sinott-Armstrong 2004, Williams 1988, Thorsrud 2009, Klein 2003, Burnyeat 1983, and Burnyeat 1982. R. J. Hankinson, Robert Fogelin, Harald Thorsrud, and Michael Williams have been particularly influential in my interpretation of Pyrrhonism.

The Stoics and some others say that there are three parts of philosophy – logic, physics, ethics – and they begin their exposition with logic ... We follow them without holding an opinion on the matter ... (PH 2.2)

What the Stoics call logic includes what philosophers today would call epistemology, and what they call physics includes what contemporary philosophers would think of as metaphysics. Sextus says that Pyrrhonists don't have their own opinion about what philosophy is for the simple reason that Pyrrhonism is not about putting forward and defending positions on philosophical matters such as the true nature of philosophy; rather, as Sextus says earlier, Pyrrhonism is an ability to reach equipollence between opposing views, which leads to suspending judgment and experiencing tranquility (PH 1.4).

Similarly, I will argue in chapter three that Nāgārjuna is working purely dialectically with metaphysical and epistemological definitions from opponents such as Ābhīdharmikas and Naiyāyikas, because his ultimate goal is not the elucidation of another philosophical doctrine, but rather the “pacification of conceptual proliferation” (*prapañcōpaśama*). In chapter four I will argue that reading Jayarāśi as working with his opponents' definitions of the means of knowledge rather than putting forward any theory of his own makes the best sense of his text, especially in light of the fact that he ends his text by saying, “When, in this way, the principles are entirely destroyed, all everyday practices are made delightful, because they are not deliberated” (TUS 14.5).¹⁰⁵ Thus, my answer to the objection above is that radical metaphilosophical skeptics do offer definitions of philosophy or kinds of philosophical activity, but rather than putting forward their own definitions, they rely exclusively on those of their opponents.

¹⁰⁵ *tad evam upapluteṣv eva tattveṣv avicāritaramaṇīyāḥ sarve vyavahārā ghaṭanta iti.* (TUS p. 125).

But shouldn't I, *as an interpreter*, offer some kind of account of the general features of what it is that metaphilosophical skeptics are doubting, even if such skeptics themselves would be unwilling to do so? I will give more detail on the specific targets of Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi in terms of the history of classical Indian philosophy in the next two chapters. Here I'll give a more general answer: the target of metaphilosophical skepticism is the attempt at something like a complete account or ultimate justification for things like knowledge, reality, morality, and so forth, or particular sub-sets of these categories such as knowledge of the external world or the reality of universals. A famous – albeit still quite vague – formulation of this idea comes from Wilfrid Sellars: “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars 1962, 35). It is the possibility or desirability of achieving this sort of aim that metaphilosophical skeptics question. However, the target of metaphilosophical skepticism is an *attitude* about the topics of philosophy, rather than any particular position about them.¹⁰⁶ This is the attitude that Pyrrhonists call “dogmatism” or the attitude that Nāgārjuna might think of as harmful attachment to views. It is an attitude in which philosophers think they've “gotten things right” or even could “get things right” in some fundamental sense that goes beyond everyday concerns. Saying, “I know what time the bus arrives,” may not be problematic, but when one asks, “What is knowledge *really?*” the dogmatic attitude tends to arise, and it is precisely at such junctures that metaphilosophical skeptics such as Sextus, Nāgārjuna, and Jayarāśi begin their attacks.

¹⁰⁶ This is why metaphilosophical skepticism is different than anti-realism, anti-foundationalism, or any other theory that opposes some particular position (realism, foundationalism, etc.). Furthermore, one could be just as dogmatic about anti-realism as one could be about realism. Metaphilosophical skeptics on the more radical end of the spectrum want to avoid taking any position on such philosophical issues.

This is why I would not call Kant a radical metaphilosophical skeptic, although he does exhibit a concern about metaphilosophical skepticism. Kant does reject a certain notion of philosophy, but he then replaces it with another kind of philosophy: transcendental philosophy. And Kant seems to have what Pyrrhonists would call a dogmatic attitude about his brand of philosophy. Radical metaphilosophical skeptics such as Sextus, Nāgārjuna, and Jayarāśi, on the other hand, hope their readers will eventually stop doing philosophy all together. However, I do think there are mitigated metaphilosophical skeptics; philosophers such as Dignāga, Hume, and Kant deny some kinds of views and dogmatic attitudes. Sextus, Nāgārjuna, and Jayarāśi are radical metaphilosophical skeptics, since they want, in the end, to overthrow all philosophical views.

The strange thing about the radical attitude, however, is that it is cultivated through the use of philosophical arguments. The use of philosophical arguments to engender metaphilosophical skepticism is, on the face of it, quite absurd. It would be as if proponents of vegetarianism were to hone their skills as butchers. The challenge of making sense of this apparent absurdity, much less giving an account of why philosophically gifted individuals would advocate such an attitude, is what excites me as an interpreter. As a philosopher, I am intrigued by the idea that metaphilosophical skeptics may be right; perhaps the apparent inability of philosophers in any tradition to come to fully compelling answers really ought to engender the attitude of metaphilosophical skepticism as a response to the human condition.

I think the biggest obstacle to understanding what I mean by metaphilosophical skepticism is that it is not a specific philosophical position, but rather an *attitude* that

constitutes a broadly defined general category. The idea that skepticism is a position about particular matters as opposed to an attitude about philosophical matters in general is one of the major differences between post-Cartesian skepticism and radical metaphilosophical skepticism. It also presents the greatest problem in explaining such skepticism to contemporary audiences. We think we know what skepticism is. The discovery that we might not is one that metaphilosophical skeptics would find delightfully subversive to our philosophical self-understanding.

To sum up my introduction of the category of metaphilosophical skepticism, the following taxonomic table might help. This table is based on and expands some of the helpful classifications of skepticism given by Fogelin (1985, 5-7) and Garrett (2004, 69-73). The classifications are originally Fogelin's, but Garrett organizes them nicely into six kinds: domain ("sets of propositions toward which they are directed" – can be general or limited), character (theoretical, prescriptive, or practicing)¹⁰⁷, object (epistemological skepticism or conceptual skepticism), origin (antecedent or consequent), degree (mitigated or unmitigated) and persistence (constant or variable). I think of metaphilosophical skepticism as a third option in the object classification, although there is considerable overlap with the other classifications as well. Although this table doesn't represent all these classification schemes¹⁰⁸ and there are more subtleties in these matters,

¹⁰⁷ Concerning the character of skepticism, "theoretical" means that skeptics assent to a skeptical conclusion without necessarily letting it affect their actions, "prescriptive" means that skeptics claim that their skepticism is normative in that we should be skeptics, and "practicing" means that skeptics actually live their skepticism, as Sextus and other Pyrrhonian skeptics claim to do.

¹⁰⁸ My chart doesn't touch on persistence as constant or variable or on origin as antecedent or consequent; the latter is Hume's classification (*Enquiry*, Section 12, Part 1). I'm not sure about the origin of metaphilosophical skepticism. It seems most metaphilosophical skeptics start out as earnest, truth-seeking philosophers and hit upon metaphilosophical skepticism after experiencing frustration in the search for truth, and so you might call it consequent skepticism. But on the other hand, *after* the shift in attitude, metaphilosophical skeptics tend to begin any subsequent philosophical activity in a generally doubtful state, and so it could be called antecedent. Persistence cuts across the epistemological/ metaphilosophical

the table provides a useful starting point for discussions on the taxonomy of epistemological and metaphilosophical skepticism.

Table 1. Epistemological and Metaphilosophical Skepticism: A Taxonomy

Kind/object of skepticism	Domain(s) and Character(s) of skepticism	Type(s) of arguments employed	Some varieties; some representatives
Epistemological skepticism ¹⁰⁹	<i>Domain:</i> knowledge in general or knowledge of some limited domain (the external world, other minds, causation, religion, ethics, etc.) <i>Character:</i> often theoretical, sometimes prescriptive, rarely practicing	Epistemological arguments whose conclusions assert truth-claims about a lack of knowledge in general or in some limited domain	<i>Methodological:</i> Descartes, many contemporary epistemologists <i>Mitigated</i> ¹¹⁰ : Hume (in <i>Enquiry</i>) <i>Radical/Unmitigated:</i> Unger (in <i>Ignorance</i>), “the skeptic” as a fictional character in contemporary epistemology ¹¹¹
Metaphilosophical skepticism	<i>Domain:</i> philosophy itself (variously defined), the possibility or desirability of achieving the aims	Mostly conceptual arguments ¹¹² (sometimes epistemological arguments or therapeutic counter-	<i>Radical/Unmitigated (doubtful toward philosophy in general)</i> ¹¹³ : Sextus Empiricus, Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, Montaigne (in <i>Apology</i>),

divide and is often a matter of dispute (for example, the rustic vs. urbane debate in the interpretation of Pyrrhonism is about whether a Pyrrhonist’s skepticism is constant or variable as well as its domain).

¹⁰⁹ “An epistemological skeptic accepts a system of beliefs as intelligible, but challenges the supposed grounds for these beliefs” (Fogelin 1985, 6).

¹¹⁰ Garrett notes that Hume has two senses of mitigated skepticism: a mitigation of degree and a mitigation of domain (Garrett 2004, 72). In the *Enquiry*, Hume recommends both types.

¹¹¹ Unger’s *Ignorance* is unmitigated in the domain of knowledge in general. The fictional skeptic is generally unmitigated in some specific domain such as knowledge of the external world.

¹¹² This does not mean, however, that metaphilosophical skepticism is conceptual skepticism in Garrett’s sense; although metaphilosophical skeptics question the intelligibility of various claims, they do not necessarily make any truth-claim of their own, whereas many conceptual skeptics (such as Logical Positivists) do make subsequent truth-claims.

¹¹³ I’ve drawn the radical-mitigated distinction with regard to metaphilosophical skepticism as basically one of domain here (i.e., all of vs. parts of philosophy), although one could – as I will in chapter five – draw the distinction in terms of degree (the degree of conviction about or attachment to one’s philosophical beliefs).

	<p>of philosophy, impulses toward philosophizing, dogmatic attachment to philosophical views, etc.</p> <p><i>Character:</i> most often practicing (especially in radical form), sometimes theoretical or prescriptive (especially in mitigated form)</p>	<p>arguments) whose conclusions attempt to demonstrate the untenability of various philosophical theories according to the opponents' own standards; such skeptics do not necessarily make any philosophical truth-claims of their own</p>	<p>Wittgenstein (in pure therapeutic moments)¹¹⁴</p> <p><i>Mitigated (doubtful toward some areas or kinds of philosophy):</i> Dignāga (as a skeptical rationalist), Hume (in <i>Treatise</i> 1.4.7), Kant (toward non-transcendental philosophy), Rorty (in dismissive moments)¹¹⁵</p>
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None of this should be taken to overlook the many differences between metaphilosophical skeptics such as Sextus, Nāgārjuna, and Jayarāśi. The benefit of a new term for an over-arching category is that we need not claim, for example, that Jayarāśi is a Pyrrhonist or that Sextus is a Mādhyamika. Instead of viewing Indian philosophers in Western terms or vice versa, the category of metaphilosophical skepticism is sufficiently strange to be cross-cultural from the start. While some Indian philosophers are tokens of the general type of metaphilosophical skepticism, there are a few distinctive features about Indian metaphilosophical skeptics. First, these skeptics argue not that concepts of knowledge fail to apply in certain situations, but that these very philosophical concepts

¹¹⁴ I'll make the case for attributing radical metaphilosophical skepticism to Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi in the next two chapters. I take Montaigne's *Apology for Raymond Seybond* to be recommending a fideist wholesale abandonment of philosophy in favor of faith (for more on Montaigne and skepticism, see Hartle 2005). In Wittgenstein's more purely therapeutic moments, I take him at his word that he really wants to stop doing philosophy, although it's not clear what the persistence of this attitude is.

¹¹⁵ If Hayes is right about Dignāga, then there are some, albeit very minimal, philosophical beliefs that are acceptable even if the vast majority are not. Hume's situation in *Treatise* 1.4.7 is complex, but I think that while he finds himself in radical metaphilosophical skepticism due to his epistemological arguments against reason, induction, external objects, the self, etc., the fact that he finds a way out (backgammon, being merry with his friends, etc.) shows that his skepticism is mitigated by nature, not reason. Rorty dismisses quite a bit of philosophy, especially the kind that traces its genealogy to the Locke to Kant tradition of epistemology, but he does accept philosophy as edifying discourse.

themselves are incoherent. This makes it closer to conceptual skepticism than epistemological skepticism, although I take metaphilosophical skepticism to constitute a third kind of skepticism with regard to what Garrett calls its object. Second, they utilize a contextualism in which many statements are incoherent in a philosophical context, but can be useful in an everyday, practical context.¹¹⁶ Third, they employ argumentative strategies that are somewhat different than those used by Western skeptics, from the purely negative *prasaṅga* (*reductio*) method of Jayarāśi to Nāgārjuna's argument that emptiness leads to the relinquishing of all views. The word "skepticism" comes closest to capturing the temperaments and arguments of certain Indian philosophers, but only when "skepticism" is used as an umbrella term encompassing a variety of family resemblances. I'll revisit the unique characteristics of Indian metaphilosophical skepticism in chapter five after having discussed Madhyamaka and Jayarāśi in chapters three and four.

My focus in this section has been on the actual metaphilosophical skeptics, although I did mention the concern about the issue of metaphilosophical skepticism on the part of non-skeptics, for example, in the *Nyāyasūtra*. In the next two chapters I will continue to focus on the skeptics themselves, but I stress that doing so will also clarify the concern about metaphilosophical skepticism by demonstrating why non-skeptical philosophers in classical India found these skeptics so objectionable. I hope chapters three and four can contribute to our historical understanding of the place of skeptical

¹¹⁶ On Fogelin's criteria, this makes its persistence variable as opposed to constant (Garrett 2004, 72-3). Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi are not necessarily skeptical in everyday contexts, only in philosophical ones. Nonetheless, I think both of them hope the skeptical attitude cultivated in philosophical contexts will have *some* carry-over effect in everyday contexts (Nāgārjuna might hope for us to become less attached overall; Jayarāśi would hope for us to become less religious and perhaps less dogmatic overall).

concerns in the classical Indian tradition both on the part of those who pursued this type of skepticism and on the part of those who rejected it.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have carried out the experiment in cross-cultural philosophy that I set up in chapter one. After giving some general examples of skeptical thinking in classical Indian philosophy, I considered the evidence for the idealist and phenomenalist interpretations of Vasubandhu's *Viṃśikārikā*. I concluded that Vasubandhu either was or should have been a phenomenalist. While phenomenism is close to raising skeptical issues, Vasubandhuan phenomenism is not quite the same as the issue of external-world skepticism. Nonetheless, these results give some reasons in favor of the intuitive thesis: the type of epistemological thinking that can lead to the problem of external-world skepticism was clearly present in classical Indian philosophy, even if this particular instance of such thinking didn't in the end lead to the issue of external-world skepticism as we know it.

While the results of this cross-cultural experiment are not entirely clear-cut, there is nonetheless another form of skeptical concern that is quite clearly present in the classical Indian tradition: metaphilosophical skepticism. I have described some general features of this type of skepticism including details on how it differs from epistemological skepticism. With this important distinction in mind, I will turn in the next two chapters to discuss two of the most preeminent metaphilosophical skeptics in classical India, or for that matter, anywhere else: Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi.

Chapter Three

Madhyamaka: From Emptiness to Metaphilosophical Skepticism

*“The pacification of all cognitive grasping and
the pacification of conceptual proliferation are peace.
Nowhere, to no one has any dharma at all been
taught by the Buddha.”*
- Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 25.24

Nāgārjuna (circa 200 CE) is usually regarded as the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, and he has likely been one of the most variably interpreted philosophers in history. In the hands of his interpreters in India, Tibet, East Asia, and the West, Nāgārjuna has been read as everything from a nihilist, mystic, anti-realist, transcendental metaphysician, deconstructionist, irrationalist, empiricist, and skeptic.¹ My goal in this chapter is to offer a skeptical interpretation that incorporates the strengths of mystical and anti-realist interpretations while avoiding what I see as their weaknesses. In particular, I will argue that Nāgārjuna is best interpreted as a metaphilosophical skeptic along the lines I discussed at the end of the previous chapter. Rather than seeking to put forward a philosophical view about the nature of reality or knowledge, Nāgārjuna uses arguments for emptiness to purge Mādhyamikas of any view, thesis, or theory whatsoever, even views about emptiness itself.

¹ See Wood 1994 for a contemporary defense of a nihilist interpretation (which was influential in classical India), Burton 1999 for a reading that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy entails nihilism despite his non-nihilist intentions, Magliola 1984 for an appropriately playful Derridian deconstructive reading, Huntington 2007 for an irrationalist reading of a postmodern flavor, and Kalupahana 1986 for an empiricist reading in which Nāgārjuna becomes something of a “Pāli fundamentalist” seeking to debunk the metaphysical excesses of philosophers following the death of the Buddha. I will discuss mystical, anti-realist, transcendental, and skeptical interpretations in more detail in this chapter. For a general introduction to Madhyamaka, see Williams 1989, Ch. 3, and for a detailed history of Madhyamaka in India, see Ruegg 1981.

This is a strange thing to do, so I will try to make a case for attributing such a strange attitude to a philosopher of such importance in the Buddhist tradition. After discussing the strengths and weaknesses of what I see as some of the more plausible interpretations of Nāgārjuna and later Mādhyamikas such as Candrakīrti, I will put forward my own preferred interpretation. To illustrate how this interpretation can make sense of Madhyamaka philosophical practice, I will look into Madhyamaka discussions of the central philosophical issues of causation and knowledge, which I hope will provide some support for my skeptical interpretation. I will end by considering the possibility of Buddhist skepticism and some skeptical historical precedents. I will argue that Nāgārjuna's metaphilosophical skepticism fits with and in fact bolsters his Buddhist credentials. In terms of the overall framework of my project, Nāgārjuna and the non-skeptical responses he engendered from both Buddhists and non-Buddhists demonstrate a concern about metaphilosophical skepticism in the classical Indian tradition.

3.1 The delicate art of interpreting Madhyamaka

A full description of every interpretation ever given – or even simply those that have been the most popular – could easily comprise a dissertation of its own. Here I will summarize four of the more popular lines of interpretation in recent literature: mystical, anti-realist, transcendental, and skeptical interpretations.

Mystical interpretations tend to emphasize the injunctions against views and conceptualization, seeing the purpose of these texts to be that of clearing our cognitive ground to make room for ineffable direct awareness of reality. T. R. V. Murti has offered one of the clearest versions of a mystical interpretation. In a Kantian, Hegelian, and

Vedāntin idiom, Murti emphasizes that Madhyamaka positionlessness is a kind of absolute: “This ever-vigilant dialectical consciousness of all philosophy is another kind of absolute. For, it rises above all positions, transcending the duality of the thesis and antithesis which eminently contain the whole universe” (Murti 1955, 328). He states elsewhere, “the Real is transcendent to thought” (Murti 1955, 330). For Murti, the negative dialectic practiced by the Mādhyamikas leads to transcending all theorizing and then to the direct apprehension of the Absolute or the Real.

Another version of the mystical interpretation is offered by John Taber, who suggests that the purpose of the MMK is to describe a vision “which for Nāgārjuna is ultimately based not on discursive reasoning but on some kind of non-discursive insight” (Taber 1998, 237). In a similar vein, Masao Abe explains that ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) is “śūnyatā, Emptiness completely free from conceptual distinction and beyond verbal expression. From the point of view of ultimate truth, conventional or mundane truth ... is nothing but ignorance or falsehood” (Abe 1983, 57).² Another recent mystical interpretation is offered by Stephen Phillips, who claims, “The most important point ... for an overall understanding of Nāgārjuna is, apparently, the mystical motivation” (Phillips 1995, 16).³

In calling these interpretations mystical, I am using the characterization of mystical experience popularized by William James.⁴ According to James, a mystical

² Abraham Vélez de Cea offers a critique of several scholars who see Nāgārjuna as a mystic (including Murti and Abe), although he focuses on more recent scholars, such as James L. Fredericks, who compare Nāgārjuna to the Christian mystic St. John of the Cross. Nonetheless Vélez de Cea does see the concepts of emptiness in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross as performing a similar ethical function (Vélez de Cea 2006).

³ Somewhat less-developed versions of mystical interpretations can also be found in Grenier 1970, 75 and King-Farlow 1992, 21.

⁴ There are of course other characterizations of mysticism, but James’s is probably the clearest and most influential in the contemporary philosophical study of mysticism. Other characterizations are given by Bertrand Russell, who sees mysticism as “little more than a certain intensity and depth of feeling in regard

experience is characterized by “1. *Ineffability* 2. *Noetic quality* ... 3. *Transiency* ... 4. *Passivity*” (James 1958, 319). James claims that the first two criteria are most important. An experience is mystical first and foremost in being ineffable: “The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others” (James 1958, 319). Thus, a mystical interpretation claims that Nāgārjuna’s texts are intended to somehow engender some sort of direct experience in their readers, rather than merely describing some philosophical thesis. Another essential ingredient of mystical experience is its “noetic quality”: “Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (James 1958, 319). Thus, if Nāgārjuna is an advocate of mysticism, he intends for his readers to come to know something, although such knowledge is not the result of philosophical argumentation or sensory experience, but some mystical source of knowledge.

Mystical interpretations of Nāgārjuna are certainly right that there is something peculiar going on in these texts, something outside the scope of straightforward philosophical argumentation. Consider the following verse with mystical eyes: “The pacification of all cognitive grasping and the pacification of conceptual proliferation are

to what is believed about the universe” (Russell 1925, 3) and by Robert Gimello, who adds characterizations such as: “A feeling of oneness ... A strong confidence in the ‘reality’ or ‘objectivity’ of the experience ... A cessation of *normal* intellectual operations ... A sense of the coincidence of opposites” (Gimello 1978, 178). For more discussion of definitions of mysticism, see Stace 1960, 13-17, 44-47. Stace considers definitions given by Russell, James, R. M. Burke, and D. T. Suzuki and concludes that “mysticism” ought to be treated as a family resemblance term. Stace’s *Mysticism and Philosophy* is a thorough philosophical study of mysticism, which includes insightful discussions of the thesis that the content of mystical experiences is everywhere the same, the objectivity of mystical experiences, and the relation to mystical experience to logic and language.

peace. Nowhere, to no one has any dharma at all been taught by the Buddha” (MMK 25.24).⁵ On a mystical reading, the negative dialectic leads to the pacification of normal cognitive and conceptual activity and, since mystical knowledge is ineffable, in a very literal sense the Buddha could not have taught anything about such knowledge, at least not directly.⁶

Mystical interpretations of Nāgārjuna have been influential for some time. A more recent innovation has been to interpret Nāgārjuna using contemporary philosophical theories of anti-realism. The strength of anti-realist interpretations is that they give a powerful interpretation of the positive arguments for emptiness. Mark Siderits is the clearest proponent of the anti-realist interpretation. For Siderits, anti-realism is first and foremost a semantic theory, that is, it is a theory about the truth conditions of statements. As the name implies, it is a rejection of semantic realism, which states that the truth conditions of a statement are set by mind-independent reality. Semantic realism is one part of a broader theory of metaphysical realism, which Siderits defines as being composed of three theses: “(1) truth is correspondence between proposition and reality; (2) reality is mind-independent; (3) there is one true theory that correctly describes reality” (Siderits 2000, 11).⁷

The rejection of these theses is what Siderits takes the Madhyamaka project to be: “To say that all ‘things’ are empty is just to make the anti-realist point that we cannot give content to the metaphysical realist’s notion of a mind-independent reality with a nature (whether expressible or inexpressible) that can be mirrored in cognition” (Siderits

⁵ *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ/
na kva cit kasyacit kaścit dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ* // MMK 25.24.

⁶ I will discuss the sense in which mystical experience may be described in section 3.2.

⁷ I prefer to think of these three theses as three different kinds of realism: (1) is semantic, (2) is metaphysical, and (3) is epistemological.

2000, 24). The emphasis in Siderits's expositions of his interpretation varies somewhat,⁸ but the basic idea is that since semantic realism is false, metaphysical realism as a whole must also be false. This leads him to the conclusion that "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth" (Siderits 2007, 202).⁹

The anti-realist interpretation generally captures the intention of the positive arguments for emptiness. For example, Siderits's anti-realist interpretation of chapter one of the MMK offers an account of how the negative *prasaṅga* arguments against causation constitute an argument *for* emptiness of inherent nature (*svabhāva*) on the part of anything that is caused (Siderits 2004, Siderits 2007, 191-199).

The recent work of Jan Westerhoff is also in the anti-realist camp (Westerhoff 2006, 2009, 2010). He explicitly refers to "the metaphysical anti-realism defended by Nāgārjuna" (Westerhoff 2009, 207). In section 3.6 below, I will discuss Westerhoff's interpretation that Nāgārjuna wants to replace epistemic foundationalism with a sort of anti-realist contextualism about epistemic justification.

Dan Arnold offers a transcendental interpretation of Candrakīrti (*circa* 600 CE), one of Nāgārjuna's most important commentators. According to this interpretation, "Candrakīrti's deference to the conventional *is itself the argument*. That is, Candrakīrti's is a principled deference that can be understood as meant to exemplify an ultimately metaphysical claim: that there is nothing 'more real' than the world as conventionally described" (Arnold 2005, 117). This interpretation is transcendental in the sense that the metaphysical facts of emptiness and dependent origination constitute the conditions for

⁸ Siderits 2000 tends toward metaphysical anti-realism, and Siderits 2007 tends toward semantic anti-realism, or as he calls it there, "semantic non-dualism ... there is only one kind of truth" (Siderits 2007, 182).

⁹ See Siderits 2007, 202-203 for an argument that this statement is not paradoxical.

the possibility of existence, change, language, and belief. Candrakīrti criticizes foundationalist epistemological projects such as Dignāga's: "Thus, Candrakīrti finds it incoherent for his interlocutor to demand that we justify our conventional practices ... precisely because there can be no discourse that does not itself exemplify the only point that Candrakīrti finally wants to make: namely, that our conventions are themselves just further examples of *dependently originated things*, which are the only kinds of things that exist" (Arnold 2005, 182). Arnold's interpretation differs from anti-realist interpretations, because he thinks it is compatible with a realist conception of truth and it differs from skeptical interpretations, because it takes Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti to be making metaphysical claims that they accept as true. With this in mind, I will move to some skeptical interpretations.

I am obviously not the first person to suggest that Nāgārjuna is some sort of skeptic. The problem, however, is that both proponents and detractors of skeptical interpretations are sometimes unclear about what they mean by "skepticism." B. K. Matilal, for instance, while admitting that he is using a concept of skepticism that differs from Cartesian skepticism and providing some genuine illumination on the topic, pushes Nāgārjuna's skepticism too close to mysticism (Matilal 1986, 46-68, Matilal 2002, 72-83).¹⁰ Jay Garfield, while also very illuminating (especially on fruitful comparisons with Sextus, Hume, and Wittgenstein), seems to waffle too much between skepticism and anti-realism such that it becomes difficult to distinguish his interpretation from Siderits's (Garfield 2002, Ch. 1). Adrian Kuzminski, while offering an interesting comparison with

¹⁰ It is probably Matilal's push toward mysticism that inclines Siderits to characterize his skeptical interpretation as one that accepts the existence of mind-independent reality. However, I think Siderits has unfairly saddled Matilal's interpretation with something much closer to Cartesian skepticism than is warranted by a closer reading of Matilal's texts (Siderits 2000, 17).

Pyrrhonism, is overly enthusiastic in his comparison so that Sextus and Nāgārjuna become nearly identical (Kuzminski 2007, 2008).¹¹ David Burton distinguishes two possible skeptical interpretations: one that comes implausibly close to external world skepticism and another more radical skepticism that is “so thorough that it turns upon itself” (Burton 2004, 117).¹² However, he does not fully develop this radical skeptical interpretation, a task I hope to undertake with my skeptical interpretation.

Elsewhere Burton does more fully develop a skeptical interpretation, which he dismisses 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 skeptical and non-skeptical interpretations of Madhyamaka is whether the interpreter thinks that Mādhyamikas are at the end of the day making truth-claims (Arnold 2005, 134, Dreyfus 2011, 92). If this distinction is right, non-skeptical interpretations take Nāgārjuna and other Mādhyamikas to be advocating some sort of truth-claim as part of their philosophical procedure; for anti-realist interpretations, the truth-claim is quite direct, but for mystical and transcendental interpretations the claim is that there is some truth to be known, albeit not one that constitutes the conclusion of any philosophical argument. Skeptical interpreters, on the other hand, do not put forward truth-claims even indirectly.

I don’t think this should be thought of as the line between skeptical and non-skeptical interpretations, but rather it should be thought of as the distinction between

¹¹ For my review of Kuzminski’s 2008 book, which includes more in depth criticism, see Mills 2011.

¹² A nice discussion of the differences between Garfield’s and Burton’s versions of skepticism with regard to Hellenistic skepticism is found in Arnold 2005, 131-142. See also Burton 1999, Ch. 2, Dreyfus 2011, and Dreyfus and Garfield 2011 for more on Madhyamaka and classical Greek skepticism.

different *kinds* of skepticism.¹³ Dreyfus puts the question of what kind of skepticism Madhyamaka might be quite 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). To map this question onto the terminology I used in chapters one and two, one might ask: Is Madhyamaka a form of epistemological skepticism like external-world skepticism or is it a form of metaphilosophical skepticism like Pyrrhonism? Do Mādhyamikas make truth-claims about human knowledge and other topics or do they engage in philosophical arguments in order to cultivate an attitude of non-attachment to any philosophical view whatsoever?

One problem with many skeptical interpretations is that they have not sufficiently attended to the question of whether Nāgārjuna is making truth-claims and thus remain unclear about what kind of skepticism they are attributing to Nāgārjuna. Matilal, for instance, at times seems to think of Nāgārjuna as a sort of modern skeptic who makes the truth-claim that human knowledge is impossible, as when he says of Nāgārjuna, “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). At other times, Matilal admits that such a full-blown epistemological skepticism would make Nāgārjuna inconsistent and thus Nāgārjunian skeptics must be using a type of negation called *prasaṅgya* negation, or at Matilal puts it, “commitmentless denial” or “illocutionary negation” (Matilal 1986, 65-

¹³ In his discussion of Burton’s and Garfield’s characterizations of skepticism, Arnold notes that the two scholars don’t disagree in their application of the same idea of skepticism, but in the way they think of what it means for Mādhyamikas to be skeptical in the first place: Burton takes the lack of any truth-claim or knowledge-claim as the key feature of skepticism and Garfield is more interested in Madhyamaka as skeptical therapy for dogmatists (Arnold 2004, 137).

67).¹⁴ This type of negation allows skeptics to negate the claims of their opponents without thereby asserting any truth-claims of their own. Dreyfus notes a similar inconsistency in Matilal's interpretation (Dreyfus 2011, 92-93). I think there is a further issue with Matilal's leap from skepticism to mysticism: "The sceptic's argumentation, through constant practice, is supposed to lead one to an *insight* into the nature of what is ultimately real (*prajñā*). This transition from radical scepticism to some sort of mysticism (where truth is supposed to dawn upon the person if he can rid himself of all false or unwarranted beliefs) is very pronounced in the Indian tradition..." (Matilal 2004, 67). This alleged mystical insight, while being ineffable and thus not technically a truth-claim, is at the very least some sort of realization of truth. Hence, the possession of truth remains the ultimate goal for Nāgārjuna even if Matilal sees him as despairing of being able to give a philosophical statement of such truth. I will give a general critique of mystical interpretations in section 3.2, but for now I conclude that Matilal's position vacillates greatly on the issue of Mādhyamika-skeptics' relation to truth and truth-claims.

As Arnold asserts, Garfield's skepticism is compatible with truth-claims about conventional practice (Arnold 2004, 138-139).¹⁵ Dreyfus and Garfield introduce the possibility of reading Candrakīrti as a "Constructive Pyrrhonian," by which they mean a philosopher who "offers us a description of our epistemic practices *just as practices*, that is, without defending them, as well as a critique of any possible defense of those

¹⁴ Matilal also discusses *prasajya* negation in Matilal 1971, 162-165.

¹⁵ I'm not entirely sure how Garfield's and Arnold's interpretations ought to be distinguished, since both place such importance on the role of convention in Madhyamaka philosophical practice. Concerning their differences Arnold claims, "The characterization of Nāgārjuna as exemplifying skepticism (even given Garfield's understanding thereof) underestimates the extent to which Nāgārjuna's is finally a point that, in light of his commitments, it is *in principle* important for him to make ... I take the Mādhyamika claim to be the stronger one that ordinary practice cannot be coherently thought to require defense ..." (Arnold 2004, 139). Perhaps the difference is one of emphasis: Garfield emphasizes Nāgārjuna's skeptical therapy for dogmatists and Arnold emphasizes a truth-claim about the possibility of a coherent defense of convention.

practices” (Dreyfus and Garfield 2011, 126). This interpretation allows Mādhyamikas to make some constructive philosophical points as opposed to the non-constructive skepticism of Patsab Nyimadrak. Garfield himself seems to endorse a more constructive interpretation, for instance, in his account of what he sees as a Madhyamaka claim that causal explanations are reducible to observable regularities without recourse to real causal powers (Garfield 1995, 103-123, Garfield 2002, 18-20). However, Dreyfus raises an interesting issue for Garfield when he claims, “it is problematic to understand skepticism as being based on the suspension of any truth claim while still attempting to find a place for constructive philosophy” (Dreyfus 2011, 94). That is, it would seem that any attempt to construct a philosophical theory requires some truth-claims about the subject of that theory. For instance, a conventionalist, contextualist epistemology of the kind Jan Westerhoff (2010) wants to attribute to Madhyamaka philosophers would require some truth-claims about the role of conventions and contexts in our epistemic practice.

I don’t mean to suggest that skeptical interpretations other than my own are insufficiently skeptical. “Skepticism” is many things to many people, and I readily admit that some of those things involve truth-claims about the possibility of human knowledge, human cognitive abilities, or other topics. My aim is rather to do what as far as I know no other contemporary interpretation has done: to begin to fully develop a skeptical interpretation in which Nāgārjuna is not ultimately making any truth-claim and is not at the end of the day engaging in constructive philosophy. As I will show, thinking through

this sort of interpretation can do much to make sense of some of the major interpretive peculiarities of Nāgārjuna's texts.¹⁶

3.2 The middle way between anti-realism and mysticism

I would like to offer an interpretation of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti that combines the strengths and avoids the weaknesses of what I consider to be two of the more plausible lines of interpretation: mystical and anti-realist.¹⁷ My claim is that mystical

¹⁶ Richard Hayes (personal communication) has wondered how a skeptical interpretation of this kind differs from irrationalist interpretations such as Huntington 2007. I admit there is some similarity in the goal. Huntington describes the Madhyamaka goal as one in which Nāgārjuna “was interested in conjuring up a philosophical and religious world in which it appears possible completely to cease identifying with any doctrine, tenet, thesis, or point of view, a groundless world of ‘non-abiding’ in which one might surrender attachment to the elaborate and convoluted project that grows out of the compulsion to know something for certain, to command, demonstrate, prove or disprove something once and for all – including the validity of rational argumentation itself...” (Huntington 2007, 129). I agree that Nāgārjuna's ultimate concern is to “cease identifying with any doctrine” and to abandon “the compulsion to know something for certain.” However, I can't follow Huntington when he says, “It is the nature of the Mādhyamika trick not to argue, explain, command, or demonstrate – all of which would be self-defeating – but rather to *conjure*” (Huntington 2007, 128). Huntington's rather postmodern concern with an attack on rationality is, aside from obvious anachronism, neither well-supported by textual evidence nor particularly effective in reaching his stated goal. To my knowledge, Nāgārjuna never says anything about relinquishing logic, argumentation, or rationality. More to-the-point, I don't see how texts meant to be therapy for intellectuals trained in the canons of logical argumentation could accomplish their goals if these texts rejected logic outright. It seems that self-defeating argumentation is exactly the therapy needed rather than irrationalist literary tropes, which would be rejected out of hand by those most in need of therapy. On a logical note, Nāgārjuna needs his audience to provisionally accept the Principle of Non-Contradiction. *Prasaṅga* arguments only work by demonstrating contradictions and using those as a basis to reject something. If the audience wasn't horrified – at least logically – by contradictions, they might simply shrug and move on – Nāgārjuna's *prasaṅgas* would be powerless. While Nāgārjuna may not be interested in explicitly affirming logical principles by mounting a philosophical defense of logic, I don't think he was at all interested in *denying* logical principles either. Lastly, Huntington's interpretation, like much postmodern thought, relies on a sort of negative dogmatism about rationality such that irrationalists may well become attached to their irrationalism. For another critique of Huntington, see Garfield 2008.

¹⁷ I will not focus on other Mādhyamikas in the Indian and Tibetan traditions whom I readily admit are not all skeptics in the sense I claim for Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. Bhāviveka, for instance, thinks that Mādhyamikas have particular positive theses that can be put into Dignāga's logical forms (Ames 1993). Tsongkhapa also seems not to fit my skeptical reading insofar as he develops interesting theories about what makes conventional truth true and makes plenty of truth-claims about truth and existence along the way. According to Guy Newland, “Tsongkhapa does assert that there is a functioning external world. This world exists outside our minds; it is not one entity with our minds. However, in the same breath Tsongkhapa emphasizes that this external world is dependent upon consciousness and that imagining otherwise is the source of endless misery” (Newland 2011, 65). Tsongkhapa, like other Geluk commenters including Khedrupje, is even critical of a skeptical approach: “For Tsongkhapa, it is clear that the actual

readings go *too far* and anti-realist readings don't go *far enough*. My interpretation is the middle way between these extremes, and the middle is a good place for an interpretation of Madhyamaka to be.¹⁸

There are broadly two types of activity in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhymakakārikā* (MMK) and *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV) and Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* (PP). There are, on the one hand, arguments for emptiness, which include many *reductio* or *prasaṅga* arguments against other theories, but also more positive arguments. On the other hand, there are expressions of positionlessness and puzzling injunctions against holding any view (*dr̥ṣṭi*) or engaging in any conceptualization (*prapañca*), even with regard to emptiness itself. It is difficult to see how these two types of utterances can be reconciled; most interpretations do not fare well in doing so.

Aside from an obvious question of anachronism with regard to Murti's heavy use of Hegelian, Kantian, and Vedānta concepts¹⁹, I have two criticisms of mystical readings in general. First, mystical readings tend to downplay the fact that Nāgārjuna does make some seemingly positive statements about emptiness. Consider the following famous verse: "That which is dependent origination, and that which is designated based on having grasped something, that we call emptiness and the middle path itself" (MMK

practice of Buddhism *must* somehow entail – even among Buddhists who claim otherwise – reliability in conventional analysis of many matters, such as how least to harm and how best to help living beings" (Newland 2011, 60). Furthermore, Tsongkhapa and Khedrupje interpret the "all views" in MMK 27.30 to mean "all false views" (Garfield 2002, 47). This means they don't agree with a skeptical interpretation that relies on taking this verse at face value. While it is common to read Candrakīrti through the lens of Tsongkhapa in a more "constructive" vein (see Dreyfus and Garfield 2011, 126-130), as I will argue in section 3.6, I think Candrakīrti's seemingly-constructive elements are purely therapeutic.

¹⁸ Although I don't explicitly take up Arnold's transcendental interpretation of Candrakīrti here, it should become clear as I develop my skeptical interpretation that I disagree with Arnold's contention that there is some metaphysical point that Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti ultimately accept as true.

¹⁹ For more specific critiques of Murti's view, see Sullivan 1988, 96-98 and Hayes 1994, 333-337.

24.18).²⁰ It certainly seems like Nāgārjuna is making a positive claim about emptiness and its relation to various Buddhist concepts. Mystical interpreters might, of course, say this claim is meant to be relinquished at some point, but a mystical interpretation retains a certain amount of mystery about what prompts us to move from such seemingly positive claims to an ineffable experience.

Mystical interpreters wanting to press the issue might claim that such verses are trying to actually *explain*, albeit incompletely, the content of mystical experience. W. T. Stace, for instance, argues that mystical experience can't be completely ineffable, because, if that were the case, mystics would never have written of their experiences at all (Stace 1960, 291). Such experiences are only ineffable during the mystical experience of undifferentiated oneness, but they can be conceptualized and described when mystics later remember the experience in a regular, non-mystical context (Stace 1960, 297). Thus, it may be that Nāgārjuna is describing his experience in some sense. Such a line of reasoning can be answered by my second objection.

This second objection to mystical interpretations is that there is little if any textual evidence that Nāgārjuna thought there was any transcendent Real or Absolute to be intuited at the end of his philosophical procedure. There are a handful of verses that discuss reality (*tattva*), such as MMK 18.9²¹, but there is nothing to suggest these must be taken as transcendent reality that is only accessible by mystical intuition. Of course, mystically inclined philosophers claim that an ineffable experience, by its very

²⁰ *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe/
sā prajñaptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā// MMK 24.18*

²¹ *aparapratyayaṃ śāntaṃ prapañcair aprapañcitaṃ/
nīrvikalpam anānārtham etat tattvasya lakṣaṇaṃ// MMK 18.9*

One could take this verse as supplying a “characteristic of reality” (*tattvasya lakṣaṇaṃ*) for use in Nāgārjuna’s arguments against self (*ātman*), rather than a positive characterization of mystical experience.

ineffability, cannot be truly described, and they attempt instead to use language that acts as guide toward such realization. I admit that Nāgārjuna may in fact have meant for his language to act as such a guide, but he never *tells* us that this is what he is doing.

To illustrate my point that a mystical interpretation has little textual basis, I find it helpful to consider some contrast cases in which mystical philosophy is clearly present. Among the most explicit mystics are Sufi philosophers such as Al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali describes a kind of experience, “which the Sufis call ‘ecstasy’ (‘hāl’), that is to say, according to them, a state in which, absorbed in themselves and in the suspension of sense-perceptions, they have visions beyond the reach of the intellect” (Al-Ghazali n.d., 18). Al-Ghazali also illustrates the distinction between mundane discursive knowledge and mystical knowledge via the amusing and instructive metaphor of the difference between being familiar with the scientific definition of drunkenness and actually being drunk (Al-Ghazali n. d., 43-44). If a mystic such as Al-Ghazali can be so explicit, why would Nāgārjuna so completely conceal his mystical tendencies?

Closer to Nāgārjuna’s historical context one can find clear exhortations to mystical experience in the Upaniṣads, later Vedānta interpretations, and perhaps in some Buddhist contexts. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, for instance, discusses four states of consciousness (waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and a fourth state called *turīya*).

The fourth is measureless, not to be employed, in which there is the cessation of the phenomenal world (*prapañcopaśamaḥ*), the auspicious, the non-dual. In this way the syllable “*oṃ*” just is the *ātman*. One who knows in this way enters into the *ātman* by means of the *ātman*. (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 12)²²

The last sentence in particular seems to fit James’s definition of a “noetic quality” that somehow goes beyond normal means of knowledge. The Vedānta philosopher

²²*amātraś-caturtho ‘vyavahāryaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivo ‘dvaita evam-oṃkāra ātmaiva samviśatyātmanā ‘tmānaṃ ya evaṃ veda. MU 12.*

Gauḍapāda, in discussing this state of consciousness, claims, “By the sages who have gone to the opposite shore of the Veda and who are free from passion, fear and anger, this [ātman], in which there is the cessation of the phenomenal world, which is without a second, is indeed seen without imagination” (ĀŚ 2.35).²³ This idea of seeing the ātman without imagination would seem to support a sort of mystical insight, since one certainly does not see the ātman with one’s eyes! This also supports the analogy between mystical experience and sensory experience in which mystical experience is more like perceptual experience than it is like rational or argumentative knowledge (James 1958, 339). Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, does not use perceptual metaphors to discuss anything like a direct experience of reality.²⁴

There are also Buddhist texts that seem amenable to mystical interpretations, especially those that discuss meditative practices. Buddhist meditation techniques are usually split into two main varieties: tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). The *Samaññaphala Sutta* describes the states of consciousness known as the four absorptions (Pāli: *jhāna*, Sanskrit: *dhyāna*) in which the mind becomes increasingly concentrated. These absorptions are examples of tranquility meditation and some scholars consider these states to be mystical in some sense. Consider the description of the first absorption: “Being thus detached from sense-desires, detached from unwholesome states, he enters and remains in the first jhāna, which is with thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with delight and joy” (DN 2.75). The states become increasingly concentrated until

²³ *vitārāga-bhaya-krodhair-munibhir-veda-pāragaiḥ/ nirvikalpo hy-ayaṃ dṛṣṭaḥ prapañcopaśamo ‘dvayaḥ // ĀŚ 2.35 //*

²⁴ One might argue that Gauḍapāda and Nāgārjuna must have some basic similarities since they use many of the same terms, including many references to the unproduced (*ajāti*). However, I think they *do* very different things with their terms, especially with the word “*prapañca*,” which means “phenomenal world” for Gauḍapāda and “conceptual proliferation” for Nāgārjuna. For more on this point, see Mills 2010.

the fourth: "... a monk, having given up pleasure and pain, and with the disappearance of former gladness and sadness, enters and remains in the fourth jhāna which is beyond pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness" (DN 2.81). These abortions are examples of tranquility meditation and Robert Gimello, for example, claims that they are mystical states in that these experiences evoke "a feeling of unity or oneness" and a "cessation of *normal* intellectual operations" (Gimello 1978, 188).

Practices of tranquility meditation are sometimes said to prepare a meditator for the other kind of Buddhist meditation, insight (*vipassanā*): "And so, with mind concentrated, purified and cleansed, unblemished, and having gained imperturbability, he directs and inclines his mind towards knowing and seeing" (DN 2.83). In the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhana Sutta*, monks are called to apply this technique to developing an understanding of Buddhist doctrines; for example, "a monk abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in respect of the Four Noble Truths. How does he do so? Here, a monk knows it as it really is: 'This is suffering'..." (DN 22.17).

Of the two main branches of Buddhist meditation – tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) – it is insight (*vipassanā*) that seems to me to be closest to the Jamesian characterization of mysticism. While both *samatha* and *vipassanā* may be ultimately ineffable, Buddhist traditions generally agree that *samatha* meditative states, such as the *jhānas*, do not reveal the truth about reality, but are something more like exercises that allow a meditator to develop one-pointedness of mind.²⁵ Thus, *samatha* meditation lacks a "noetic quality"; it does not lead to knowledge. On the other hand, it may be a reasonable interpretation to see insight as a method of engendering mystical

²⁵ In the *Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification)*, the influential Theravāda philosopher Buddhaghosa (c. 5th century) says that concentration, which is here synonymous with tranquility, "has non-distraction as its characteristic. Its function is to eliminate distraction. It is manifested as non-wavering" (VM 3.4).

experiences that are ineffable and with a noetic quality, especially since *vipassanā* is usually thought of as insight into the true nature of reality.²⁶ Gimello, however, questions this idea, claiming that *vipassanā*

is something quite different from what is normally meant by ‘mystical experience’. It is rather an intellectual operation which, though it may be abetted by mystical experiences, is also *performed upon them*. It is a form of meditative analysis, employing the concepts and propositions of Buddhist doctrine ... despite the interdependence of discernment and mystical experience in Buddhist meditation, the two are categorically different. (Gimello 1978, 189).

Gimello thinks that *samatha* meditation is a form of mysticism and that *vipassanā* is more like a practice of careful thinking.²⁷ While I disagree with Gimello’s assertion that *samatha* is a form of mysticism (since it lacks a noetic quality), I agree with him that it is far from clear that *vipassanā* is a form of mystical experience. Nonetheless, it is outside my purpose here to offer a detailed argument for this point and I will admit that it may be at least somewhat reasonable to interpret some Buddhist descriptions of insight meditation as mystical even if the matter is far from clear.

In any case, it is extremely likely that Nāgārjuna would have been familiar with Upaniṣadic strands of mysticism and, although the Buddhist situation is more ambiguous, he would have also been familiar with Buddhist texts more amenable to mystical interpretations. Thus, he had ample philosophical terminology he *could have* chosen to use. That he did not choose to use such terminology offers evidence against mystical interpretations.

²⁶ According to Buddhaghosa the function of insight is “to abolish the darkness of delusion, which conceals the individual essences of states. It is manifested as non-delusion” (VM 14.5).

²⁷ See Mills 2004, where I agree with Gimello and others that *samatha* and *vipassanā* are equal yet distinct partners in Buddhist meditation practices. I suggest that *samatha* meditation is intended to target non-cognitive elements of a human being, which in turn helps a Buddhist cultivate moral virtues. My argument offers support for Damien Keown’s reading of Buddhist ethics as a sort of virtue ethics (Keown 2001).

The most common reason for reading Nāgārjuna as a mystic is, I suspect, far more indirect. The idea of language as a guide to mystical insight seems to be posited by proponents of mystical interpretations to make sense of Madhyamaka positionlessness under the assumption that Nāgārjuna must have had in mind had some positive realization. The assumption – shared by both contemporary and classical proponents of Madhyamaka mysticism – is that as a Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna is committed to the idea of insight into the true nature of reality; if he has no philosophical theses in the traditional sense, he must be advocating some other method of insight, namely, mystical experience. Later Buddhist commentators do discuss such direct mystical experience, but Nāgārjuna does not. It is entirely possible (and I think quite likely) that these later commentators added this notion of Nāgārjuna’s texts as a means to mystical experience for precisely the reason just given.

I will discuss this assumption in depth in sections 3.7 and 3.8 where I will argue that we should not overlook the quietist skeptical strands of Buddhist philosophy that have existed alongside the insight strands from the very beginnings of Buddhist philosophy. For now, I will simply point out it is far from clear that we are required to posit mystical experience to make sense of Nāgārjuna, since there is at least one other interpretation, my skeptical interpretation, that is capable of accounting for Nāgārjuna’s seemingly-paradoxical positionlessness. Thus, I hope to have given some reasons for thinking that mystical interpretations go too far; there is no good textual evidence for it, and we need not posit a mystical insight in order to make sense of positionlessness.

Let me turn now to the anti-realist interpretation. As I suggested earlier, this interpretation makes a great deal of sense out of Nāgārjuna’s positive statements about

emptiness. When it comes to the strange statements of positionlessness, however, the anti-realist interpretation doesn't fare as well. Whatever else anti-realism may be, it is a philosophical theory, one that purports to tell us something about how things are, even if what it tells us is that there really is no mind independent reality. Consider one expression of positionlessness: "The antidote to all views is proclaimed by the conquerors to be emptiness. Those who have a view of emptiness the conquerors called incurable" (MMK 13.8).²⁸ Siderits tries to make this work for him by inserting "metaphysical" in square brackets before the word "view," indicating that what Nāgārjuna has in mind are views about ultimate reality (Siderits 2007, 191). Of course, this may be what Nāgārjuna meant, but I think such a thesis would be what Sextus Empiricus would call "negative dogmatism," or a view or theory about how things are *not*. On this point Adrian Kuzminski asks, "if Pyrrhonism and the Mādhyamaka [sic] were both examples of dogmatic skepticism [i.e., "negative dogmatism"], it's hard to see what motivation adherents of these schools would have had to make such nonsensical, paradoxical statements about their own procedures, which go far beyond anything necessary to express dogmatic skepticism" (Kuzminski 2008, 63). If Nāgārjuna were simply an anti-realist, one wonders why he would bother saying such strange things; why not, rather, simply say, "my view is that everything is conceptually constructed" and leave it at that? Why go the extra step?²⁹

²⁸ *śūnyatā sarvadr̥ṣṭīnām proktā niḥsaraṇam jinaiḥ/*
yeṣāṃ tu śūnyatādr̥ṣṭis tān asādhyān babhāṣire// MMK 13.8

²⁹ To show that anti-realism is subject to an analysis similar to that given to every other kind of view, I find it useful and amusing to try my hand at a little *prasaṅga* of my own by asking, "What would a Mādhyamika say about anti-realism?" To begin: Is anti-realism true or is it false? If it is false, then we need not bother with it. If it is true, then is it true under some conceptual description or under no conceptual description? If it is true under no conceptual description, then there is one thing, namely anti-realism itself, which is true outside of our purposes, intentions, etc., and just fits our cognitive life *as it really is*. Then it would seem that anti-realism must take a realist theory with regard to its own truth, and

Furthermore, consider whether anti-realism is compatible with the Madhyamaka idea of the emptiness of emptiness. Jay Garfield describes it well: “since we cannot view emptiness even as empty, by virtue of its very emptiness, we cannot have a view of emptiness” (Garfield 2002, 59). Emptiness is the lack of characteristics and so “emptiness” itself cannot, on the ultimate analysis, be a characteristic; it cannot have the characteristic of emptiness – hence, the emptiness of emptiness. If anti-realism were the same as emptiness, it could not have the characteristic of being anti-realism. Like emptiness, anti-realism would have to eventually undermine itself under analysis. But proponents of anti-realism do not seem to admit this. Siderits in fact asserts that “causation is not a feature of ultimate reality” (Siderits 2007, 198). While Nāgārjuna may admit this provisionally at some point, due to the emptiness of emptiness, at a deeper level of analysis even this very claim itself must be abandoned.

3.3 The two phases of Madhyamaka activity

This leads me to my skeptical interpretation. As discussed earlier, I am not the first person to offer a skeptical interpretation. I ask readers to keep in mind the following words of Matilal: “By calling Nāgārjuna a sceptic ... I have only proposed a probable extension of the application of the term ‘scepticism’” (Matilal 1986, 50).

hence imply its own falsehood, because there is one counter-example to universal anti-realism: namely, its own truth. On the other hand, if anti-realism is true under some conceptual description, under *which* description is it true? Its own? This would seem to be begging the question, for anti-realism is true only if anti-realism is true. Some other description? Then, which one? Under philosophical analysis in general? But then why do some respectable philosophers uphold realism while utilizing the same basic concepts of logic and philosophical practice? Maybe it is true only under the description of *proper* philosophical analysis? But then, this is just anti-realism itself, which then of course implies again that the theory is question begging. Therefore, anti-realism is not established.

On my interpretation, Nāgārjuna – especially in the MMK and VV – has two general phases in his philosophical procedure, corresponding to the two kinds of statements I identified earlier.³⁰ The first phase is that of offering arguments for emptiness and against essence (*svabhāva*). Here Nāgārjuna is more-or-less anti-realist. The second phase is that of demonstrating that this idea of emptiness has the peculiar property of undermining not only all other philosophical views, but even itself, thus leaving a thorough Mādhyamika without any views, theses, or positions whatsoever. This second phase is what mystical interpreters mistakenly claim is a step to a further ineffable realization, but on my interpretation it represents nothing but the purging of philosophical impulses, the end of philosophy itself; in other words, Nāgārjuna is a radical metaphilosophical skeptic.

I do not necessarily mean that Nāgārjuna’s texts are a steady march from phase one into phase two. His texts are complex and freely move between these phases, injecting emptiness wherever it is needed. As Garfield notes, “Skeptical analysis may well be interminable analysis” (Garfield 2002, 22). Still, a general tendency to move toward the second phase can be detected in the MMK from the fact that the verses most amenable to phase two are found in the dedication (*mangalam*), at the end of several chapters, and especially at the end of the text.³¹

It might seem that this interpretation opens Nāgārjuna up to the objection that it is self-refuting or at least logically inconsistent to make a claim that you are making no claim. This is a time-honored objection that goes as far back as the *Nyāya Sūtra*

³⁰ While I think my interpretation may well apply to other Madhyamaka texts, I will concentrate in the next few sections (up through section 3.5) on the MMK and PP, and I will apply my skeptical interpretation to the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* in section 3.6.

³¹ The end of chapter verses are 5.8, 13.8, 25.24, and 27.30. Other verses suggestive of phase two are 18.5, 21.17, and 24.7.

(probably roughly contemporaneous with Nāgārjuna himself).³² As I will discuss in section 3.6, Nāgārjuna himself considers a similar objection in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (verses 5-6). Doesn't the claim that one is not making a claim refute itself? How can you have a claim and a non-claim at the same time without a brazen violation of the Law of Non-Contradiction? Here an analogy with Pyrrhonism can help. According to Harald Thorsrud, the charge of inconsistency is a category mistake: "Just as it is neither consistent nor inconsistent to ride a bicycle, the practice of scepticism, in so far as it is something the sceptic *does*, can be neither consistent nor inconsistent..." (Thorsrud 2009, 146). Likewise, Nāgārjuna's texts are part of a philosophical practice with a therapeutic, rather than theoretical goal. While what I am calling phase one looks a lot like a philosophical language-game of giving reasons for positions, in phase two Nāgārjuna is simply playing a different game.

3.4 How metaphilosophical skepticism allows us to take both phases seriously

The most obvious advantage of my interpretation is that it can account for the presence of both positive and negative kinds of statements in a way that is able to take both fully seriously. It sometimes seems as if Nāgārjuna is offering straightforward arguments for emptiness, because he *is* giving straightforward arguments for emptiness, and it sometimes seems as if Nāgārjuna is rejecting all philosophical views because he *is* rejecting all philosophical views. Granted, my interpretation might seem to place a greater emphasis on phase two, but this phase is reached only if one takes the arguments

³² See NS 2.1.12-13 in which a Madhyamaka-style argument against *pramāṇas* is considered and rejected as self-contradictory. For a thorough study of this section of the NS and its relation to the VV, see Oetke 1991. The charge of self-refutation is also the first objection Khedrupje makes against his skeptical opponent (Cabezón 1992, 258).

for emptiness seriously. In other words, phase one is the medicine one must take to reach phase two, as suggested by 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.” To insist on taking emptiness as a view is to remain in phase one. In his commentary on this verse, Candrakīrti quotes a *sūtra* in which emptiness is compared to a medicine that, once it has cured the intended illness, must purge itself from the body (PP, p. 208-9). On my interpretation, MMK 13.8 and its commentary should be taken to mean that even though one might vigorously argue for emptiness in phase one, at phase two emptiness, like a purgative drug, should remove itself along with all other philosophical views.

Anti-realist interpreters may object by pointing to Candrakīrti’s other famous metaphor in this section: that of the person who says, “Give to me, then, that same ware called ‘nothing’” (PP, p. 208). In anti-realist terms this means that emptiness is not an object or being. However, it seems to me that regarding anti-realism as a theory about what does *not* exist could be construed as a subtle form of grasping at being, namely, grasping at the being of a theory that tells us that certain things do not really exist. The problem isn’t with the contents of anti-realism in that it inclines toward a nihilistic theory; rather, in phase two the problem is that anti-realism is a theory at all.

Most philosophers are accustomed to residency in something like phase one. We put forward arguments, refute other arguments, and so forth. But what is it like to inhabit phase two, this strange realm of positionlessness? Phase two is described beautifully by MMK 25.24: “The pacification of all cognitive grasping and the pacification of conceptual proliferation are peace. Nowhere, to no one has any dharma at all been taught

by the Buddha.”³³ Candrakīrti’s commentary explains, “that which is the pacification, or cessation, of all bases of conceptual proliferation, that is *nirvāṇa*. ... Also, pacification of conceptual proliferation, because there is non-activity of words, is peace, because of the non-functioning of thought” (PP, p. 236).³⁴ This pacification of grasping and “conceptual proliferation” (*prapañca*) is about as extreme an end to philosophical speculation as I can imagine³⁵; it is hard to imagine that anti-realism could possibly be an option for a person in this state, since it is not only a philosophical theory but even says that the world is always mixed with conceptualization. It may seem odd to claim that the pacification of conceptual proliferation constitutes *nirvāṇa*, but notice that Candrakīrti says that it is only when *all* bases of conceptual proliferation have ceased that *nirvāṇa* is reached. In the meantime, lessening one’s attachments to views, concepts, and thoughts is a good thing for a Buddhist to do.³⁶

The notion of the “pacification of conceptual proliferation” (*prapañcopaśama*) is vital to my interpretation as it gives us the best clue as to what it is that Nāgārjuna is

³³ Erich Frauwallner has translated 25.24 as “All perception ceases, the diversity is appeased, and peace prevails. Nowhere has the Buddha proclaimed any doctrine to anyone” (Frauwallner 2010, 211). This relies on translating *prapañca* as “diversity,” which is, I think, the sense of the word in some Brahmanical contexts (such as Gauḍapāda’s *Āgama Śāstra*), but it ignores the Buddhist context in which *prapañca* has a more psychological sense of “conceptual proliferation.” Also, Frauwallner sees 25.24 as “one of the germs of the later doctrine that sees in the phenomenal world a creation of cognition” (Frauwallner 2010, 186). I don’t think this works, however, since *prapañca* does not have the idealist sense that the mind in some sense actually creates reality, but simply the psychological sense that the mind grasps at concepts.

³⁴ ... *sarveśāṃ prapañcānāṃ nimittānāṃ ya upaśamo ‘pravṛttis tān nirvāṇam. ... vācāṃ apravṛtter vā prapañcopaśamaś cittasya apravṛtteḥ śivaḥ*. PP 236.

³⁵ Another reason I like term “metaphilosophical skepticism” is that such skepticism can cause us to question what we mean by “philosophy” in the first place, to engage in skeptical metaphilosophy. A question under this topic is whether the “philosophy” which constitutes the target of metaphilosophical skepticism is merely formal, institutionalized philosophy or if it includes the natural philosophical impulses of most human beings. Tillemans considers a similar question with regard to the naturalness of the idea of *svabhāva* (Tillemans 2007, 520-523).

³⁶ It may also be that Candrakīrti’s enthusiasm has inclined him to read more into the verse than necessary. Perhaps Nāgārjuna did not mean that one should stop thinking altogether, but simply that one will find peace when one stops *grasping* at cognitions and concepts. Also, it may be that *nirvāṇa* is not as otherworldly as it is often taken to be. As the contemporary Thai monk Buddhādāsa, who often strives to make Buddhism a more practical, down-to-Earth matter, puts it, “in Dhamma language, *nibbāna* is the complete and utter extinction of *dukkha* right here and now” (Buddhadāsa 1988, 26).

telling us to avoid. “*Prapañca*” comes from the root “*pac*” or “*pañc*” and has primary meanings of “expansion, development, manifestation.” In philosophy, it is said to mean “the expansion of the universe, the visible world.” In other contexts, it could even mean “deceit, trick, fraud, error” (Monier-Williams 1994, 681). In Nāgārjuna’s context, however, we need to take into account the specific Buddhist history of this word.

According to Edgerton’s *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, “*prapañca*” comes from the Pāli “*papañca*,” which is “very hard to define.” The word has been rendered into a Tibetan word that means “spreading out, enlargement,” and “activity,” and into Chinese as a word meaning “frivolous talk” or “falsehood.” Edgerton adds that, “The freedom from *prapañca* is always praised” and that the word is “closely associated with *vikalpa*, and the contexts suggest *vain fancy, false imagining*” (Edgerton 2004, 380-381). In discussing the Nikāyas, Steven Collins points out that “*papañcā* are said to have ideas (or perception) as their cause; the ‘root of imaginings and estimations’ is said to be the idea ‘I am the thinker’ ... an idea described as an ‘internal craving’” (Collins 1982, 141). For Madhyamaka, this idea came to be associated closely with language. According to Paul Williams, “‘*prapañca*’ in the Madhyamaka seems to indicate firstly the utterance itself, secondly the process of reasoning and entertaining involved in any articulation, and thirdly further utterances which result from this process” (Williams 1980, 32).

The pacification (*upaśama*)³⁷ of *prapañca* is the goal of phase two. However radical phase two might be, it seems unlikely that a person in this phase would be worried

³⁷ I prefer “pacification” for “*upaśama*” in this context instead of “cessation,” because the root “*śam*” means not only “cessation” but “to become tired ... be quiet or calm or satisfied or contented” (Monier-Williams 1994, 1053). Also, the Sanskrit etymology resonates nicely with the Latin root of “pacification,” which is “*pax*” (peace). More importantly, “*śam*” is the root for “*śamatha*” (tranquility), which is the Sanskrit name for one of the forms of meditation recognized by Buddhists, the other being *vipaśyana* (insight). This latter connotation probably would have been obvious to Nāgārjuna’s Buddhist readers.

about philosophical theories, which rely a great deal on *prapañca* in the sense of involving the expansion of concepts and language (hence the translation, “conceptual proliferation”). *Prapañca* also has a negative affective dimension involving unnecessary and harmful attachments to concepts and utterances. In this sense the Buddha did not teach any Dharma, because he did not mean to put forward a theory, he meant to cure us of the disease of wanting to put forward theories. In phase one, a person might be convinced that all beings really are empty; in phase two, one ceases to even ask the question of whether beings are empty, much less grasp at one answer. On my interpretation, both mysticism and anti-realism, in positing either that there is or is not some ultimate reality, entirely miss the point. The point is to stop hankering after either non-conceptual access to some absolute or conceptual construction of theories that claim that there are no absolutes. The point is to stop trying to give a general theory of anything, even a theory of universal emptiness. The point is to stop philosophizing. Thus, Nāgārjuna really means it when he denies having a view (*dr̥ṣṭi*) or thesis (*pratijñā*), and in the preceding paragraphs I hope to have given some idea of what I think that means.

Lastly, there is the matter of the link between these two phases. What could they possibly have to do with each other? The clue comes in the penultimate verse of the MMK: “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?” (MMK 27.29).³⁸ This expresses the emptiness of emptiness I discussed earlier. The idea is that, if emptiness is accepted as a philosophical theory in phase one, then there ceases to be

³⁸ *atha vā sarvabhāvānām śūnyatvāc chāśvatādayaḥ/
kva kasya katamāḥ sambhaviṣyanti dr̥ṣṭayaḥ//* MMK 27.29

anything for a philosophical theory about emptiness to be about, a need for a person to have such a theory, or any basis for such a theory. This understanding of the emptiness of emptiness was shared by Patsab, whom I will discuss in more detail in section 3.8 (Dreyfus 2011, 98-99, 104-105).

One might object that the “and so forth” (*ādayaḥ*) after “eternality” (*śāsvatā*) is meant only to add “nihilism” (*ucchedavāda*) to the list of views that emptiness makes impossible; perhaps a view of the middle way is safe. However, this route seems to be blocked by the last verse: “I bow to him, Gautama, who, by means of compassion, taught the true Dharma for the purpose of abandoning all views” (MMK 27.30).³⁹ Of course, there is a long-standing debate about whether “all views” (*sarvadṛṣṭi*) here means all views whatsoever, or all *false* views, as is commonly interpreted by many Indian, Tibetan, and Western commentators.⁴⁰ I think we should take Nāgārjuna at his word.⁴¹ While I can’t solve the dispute here, I will say that a strength of my interpretation is that we can take Nāgārjuna at his word in both phases; we need not ignore or downplay the significance of either. By taking him as a metaphilosophical skeptic, we can see a certain unity in Nāgārjuna’s thought without attributing to him either too little or too much.

Skepticism is just right.

³⁹ *sarvadṛṣṭiprahānāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśyat/
anukampām upādāya taṃ namasyāmi gautamaṃ//* MMK 27.30

⁴⁰ Proponents of the “false views” translation note that *dṛṣṭi* often has a negative connotation of “a wrong view” (Monier-Williams 1994, 492). While it’s possible that Nāgārjuna meant “wrong views,” it is also possible he meant views in general. The same Sanskrit word is used for the element of the Eightfold Path known as “right view” (*samyag-dṛṣṭi*), which has a positive connotation in most contexts (in sections 3.7 and 3.8 I will deal with the objection that a denial of all views makes Nāgārjuna insufficiently Buddhist insofar as it denies this element of the Eightfold Path). In any case, an appeal to the text cannot solve this debate. My point is that if we want to take “*dṛṣṭi*” as meaning all views, it is possible to do so in a way that makes sense of the text. In favor of my translation, though, I would point out that a major reason in favor of the “false views” translation – that the text cannot make sense otherwise – is simply not the case.

⁴¹ In this I agree with Garfield in his agreement with Ngog and the Nying-ma school (Garfield 2002, 46-68). In section 3.8 I will discuss Patsab and Khedrupjey’s opponent in the *Great Digest* as others who take MMK 27.30 at face value. Fuller 2005 is a thorough study of *ditṭhi* (the Pāli equivalent of *dṛṣṭi*) in early Buddhism.

3.5 The cause of skepticism: Why critique theories of causation?

Having given a general characterization of my interpretation of Madhyamaka, I would like to turn to two specific areas of Madhyamaka philosophy: the critique of theories of causation and the critique of epistemology. My contention is that metaphilosophical skepticism can make sense of why Mādhyamikas offered such deep criticisms of these areas of central philosophical concern. Their intention is not to offer some alternative to other philosophers' theories about causation and knowledge (such as anti-realism or contextualism), but rather to use metaphysical and epistemological theorizing to uproot the impulse to engage in any such theorization at all.⁴²

In this section I'll concentrate on the first chapter of the MMK, which contains Nāgārjuna's treatment of theories of causation. I'll ask two questions about this section. First, what is the overall argument of the chapter? Second, what is the point of this argument?

After the dedicatory verses discussed earlier – which include a mention of the “pacification of conceptual proliferation” (*prapañcopaśama*) – the chapter begins with one of the most famous verses of the text, which is a kind of thesis statement of the chapter to follow:

Not from itself, nor even from another, nor from both, nor even from no cause, are any arisen beings found anywhere at all. (MMK 1.1)⁴³

The first thing to notice is that this is an example of a *catuskoṭi* or tetralemma in which four options are given; in this *catuskoṭi* all four options are denied. There is quite a bit of

⁴² I won't say much about mysticism in the next two sections because, while mystical interpreters would agree that Nāgārjuna has no ultimate theories about these matters, I disagree with their contention that there is some mystical insight at the end of the day for reasons I discussed in section 3.2.

⁴³ *na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ/
utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kva cana ke cana//* MMK 1.1

interesting contemporary scholarship on the logic of the tetralemma.⁴⁴ I agree with much of this scholarship (e.g., Ruegg 1977, Chakravarti 1980, and Westerhoff 2006) that with careful attention to the type of negation involved the *catuṣkoṭi* need not be seen as violating the laws of non-contradiction or excluded middle and that it can be interpreted in accordance with classical logic⁴⁵; however, my concern here is with the basic structure

⁴⁴ Some contemporary sources that discuss logical aspects of the *catuṣkoṭi* are Robinson 1957, Ruegg 1977, Chakravarti 1980, Galloway 1989, Garfield and Priest 2002, and Westerhoff 2006, 2009, Ch. 4. Ruegg (1977, 39-52) gives a summary of work on the issue from the 1930s through the early 1970s.

⁴⁵ The logical issues arise when one understands a negative *catuṣkoṭi* as follows:

1. $\sim P$
2. $\sim\sim P$
3. $\sim (P \ \& \ \sim P)$
4. $\sim\sim (P \vee \sim P)$

(In MMK 1.1, “P” would be “the cause arises from itself.”) If this is interpreted according to straightforward propositional logic, it would seem that denying both option one and option two at the same time violates the Law of Noncontradiction, since ‘ $\sim\sim P$ ’ is (by the rule of Double Negation Elimination) equivalent to ‘P’ and then you get ‘ $\sim P \ \& \ P$ ’. There are also positive versions of the *catuṣkoṭi* (e.g., MMK 18.8) in which option four is ‘ $\sim (P \vee \sim P)$ ’, which violates the Law of Excluded Middle. A third major issue is that the third and fourth options are not logically distinct: applying De Morgan’s Theorem to option four of the positive *catuṣkoṭi* (‘ $\sim (P \vee \sim P)$ ’) turns it into “ $\sim P \ \& \ \sim\sim P$ ” which (via Double Negation Elimination) is logically equivalent to the third option (“ $P \ \& \ \sim P$ ”). Ruegg 1977, Chakravarti 1980, and Westerhoff 2006 bring in the *prasajya-paryudāsa* distinction I discussed in section 3.1. They take the negations of each option of the negative *catuṣkoṭi* as *prasajya* negations that do not accept the opponents’ presuppositions (such as the existence of *svabhāva*). Westerhoff also points out that Nāgārjuna means to use a *prasajya* negation of both a proposition and its *paryudāsa* negation, which means there is no violation of the Principles of Non-Contradiction or Excluded Middle any more than there is in saying “the number seven is neither green nor not green” or “unicorns are neither brown nor not brown.” Westerhoff and Chakravarti also bring in the idea of “illocutionary negation” in which the negation has a performative aspect of refusing to engage in a practice such as promising or asserting (Chakravarti 1980, 305, Westerhoff 2006, 379). Westerhoff sees this as a “more general notion” than *prasajya* negation, since it also includes cases such as recognition of a lack of evidence to either assert or deny a statement; he then interprets the fourth option of the *catuṣkoṭi* to mean that Nāgārjuna does not assert either P or $\sim P$, which makes it logically distinct from the third option (Westerhoff 2006, 379-380). I’m more sympathetic to Chakravarti who sees all four negations as illocutionary negations. This may make options three and four logically equivalent at the end of the day, but only if illocutionary negations are within the purview of Double Negation Elimination, which they may not be. In any case Nāgārjuna’s point seems to be more that his opponents might *think* they are separate options. Westerhoff raises the concern that illocutionary negations make it seem that Nāgārjuna is ultimately uncommitted to the truth or falsity of statements concerning the existence of *svabhāva* and answers that “we want to assert a negative proposition when speaking *about* the proposition concerned” (Westerhoff 2006, 381). I’m not so sure; while Nāgārjuna makes assertions in phase one, such assertions are ultimately a means to ceasing to make any assertions in phase two. I would suggest that even statements about universal emptiness are not at the end of the day straightforward assertions of negative propositions, although that is how they appear; I see Nāgārjuna’s statements in phase one as provisional statements that are ultimately taken back in phase two.

Garfield and Priest (2002) claim that some of Nāgārjuna’s statements should be interpreted as embracing true contradictions and that Nāgārjuna is therefore hinting at a type of non-classical, paraconsistent logic called dialetheism. Irrationalist interpretations such as Huntington 2007 take

of the argument rather than with its logical cogency or relevance to the philosophy of logic.

Another preliminary matter is the philosophical target of Nāgārjuna's argument. While his opponents here aren't *only* Ābhidharmika Buddhists, the second option, which he discusses in the most detail, is clearly the view held by the Abhidharma schools (although the Vaiśeṣikas also hold a version of this view). According to Abhidharma metaphysics, there are four *pratyayas*, a term which I translate as "conditions," although I should note that it includes aspects of what most contemporary Western people would think of as a cause (such as Aristotle's "efficient cause"), but also other factors that are conditions for something taking place. Nāgārjuna lists them as follows:

There are thus only four kinds of conditions (*pratyayas*): material cause (*hetu*), object of a cognition (*ālambana*), immediately preceding cause (*anantaram*), and dominant cause (*adhipateyam*). There is no fifth kind of condition. MMK 1.2.⁴⁶

The *pratyayas* can be explained through examples. The material cause (*hetu*) of a sprout is a seed. The sprout would in turn be cause for, say, a mango tree, which is a material cause for a mango. An object of a cognition (*ālambana*) would be the taste that one might cognize when biting into a piece of mango. An immediately preceding cause (*anantaram*) is the state of affairs right before an event, such as a piece of mango reaching one's tongue. A dominant cause (*adhipateyam*) is what gets the whole process

Nāgārjuna to be purposefully denying logical principles. Concerning Garfield and Priest, we simply don't need anything as exotic as dialetheism to make sense of the *catuṣkoṭi*. A bit of care with the type of negation involved will do. I'm not denying dialetheic logic, just that we need it to interpret Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭis*. For my critique of Huntington, see footnote 16 at the end of section 3.1.

⁴⁶ *catvāraḥ pratyayā hetuś cālabanam anantaram/*
tathaiṅvādhipateyaṃ ca pratyayo nāsti pañcamah// MMK 1.2

going and gives it its purpose, such as one’s decision to eat a mango in order to enjoy its tastiness.⁴⁷ Nāgārjuna argues against each of these *pratyayas*.

There is disagreement among both classical and contemporary commentators concerning the details of Nāgārjuna’s argument⁴⁸, but here’s how I characterize the argument:

Option One: Suppose an arisen being were to arise from itself (in Indian philosophy this view, which was held by the *Sāṃkhya* school, is called *satkāryavāda*, the view that the effect is pre-existent in the cause).⁴⁹ But this can’t work, because you don’t find the essence (*svabhāva*) of the effect in its conditions (*pratyaya*) (verse 1.3ab). For instance, you don’t find the light and heat of fire in the firewood or the consistency of yogurt in fresh milk.

Option Two: Suppose an arisen being were to arise from something else (this view is called *asatkāryavāda*, the view that the effect is not present in the cause, which was the view of Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Abhidharma Buddhists). There are several arguments against this option.

- First, “If its own essence (*svabhāva*) is not found, then the essence of the other (*parabhāva*) is not found” (verse 1.3cd).⁵⁰ That is, once you rule out

⁴⁷ For more details on the *pratyayas* and their Abhidharma pedigree, see Garfield 1995, 108-109, Siderits and Katsura 2006, 135, and Siderits 2007, 194.

⁴⁸ Siderits notes at least one difference in Buddhapālita’s and Candrakīrti’s interpretations of MMK 1.3cd in that Candrakīrti sees it as linked to verse four (Siderits 2004, 404). Some differing contemporary summaries of the argument can be found in Hayes 1994, 308-310, Garfield 1995, 103-123, Taber 1998, 213-222, Siderits 2004, 401-408, and Westerhoff 2009, 99-113. One major difference is that Garfield, unlike most other commentators, claims Nāgārjuna draws a distinction between cause (*hetu*) and condition (*pratyaya*) and seeks to demonstrate the incoherence of causes, which have essences, while showing that conditions, which are empty, are philosophically acceptable as part of “Nāgārjuna’s conventionalist regularism” (Garfield 2002, 72 – see also Garfield 1995, 103-105). Siderits points out that the claim that Nāgārjuna makes such a distinction “leads to a strained reading of MMK 1.4-5, as well as to the acute problem that he must then make MMK 1.11-13 objections” (Siderits 2004, 415 n. 18). I agree with Siderits here and would also point out that *hetus* are listed as one *kind* of *pratyaya* and that Nāgārjuna argues against each of the four *pratyayas* in MMK 1.7-10. I see no evidence in the text of chapter one for the distinction between *hetus* and *pratyayas* that Garfield sees. As Garfield admits, however, one of his reasons for drawing this distinction is to reconcile chapter one with the seemingly-constructive view implied by the discussion of emptiness, dependent origination, and the two truths in MMK 24 (Garfield 2002, 41).

⁴⁹ Westerhoff points out that there are actually two versions of option one: the first is that “cause and effect are *the very same object*” and the second, which was the Sāṃkhya theory, is that “the effect is *contained in*, and forms a part of, the cause” (Westerhoff 2009, 100, 103).

⁵⁰ *avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvo na vidyate*. MMK 1.3cd. Garfield glosses this argument as follows: “... the view is in fact internally contradictory. Given that things have no intrinsic nature, they are not essentially different. Given that they lack difference, they are interdependent. But given that interdependence, there cannot be the otherness needed to build otherness-essence out of dependence” (Garfield 1995, 112). Siderits (2004, 416 n. 20) argues that this reading of the argument leaves it open to Hayes’s charge that it commits the fallacy of equivocation on the words *svabhāva* and *parabhāva* such that

the first option that the essence of the effect is found in the conditions (which means the cause and effect have the same essence), it's not clear how the two separate essences required by the second option – the essence of the cause and that of the effect – are to be related. In the absence of any way to identify that *this* effect is an effect of *that* cause and *vice versa*, Nāgārjuna concludes that the “essence of the other” (*parabhāva*), meaning the essence of the cause given the essence of the effect and *vice versa*, is not found.

- Second, Nāgārjuna considers a possible answer to the problem raised in the previous argument: perhaps the two essences are related by a causal power (*kriyā*). “A causal power (*kriyā*) has no condition (*pratyaya*), nor does it occur without conditions” (1.4ab).⁵¹ That is, the idea of a causal power is contradictory, for if you assert a causal power to explain the relation between cause and effect, you need another relation to explain the relation between the causal power and the cause itself and so forth, so an infinite regress ensues. Thus, there *can't* be any such relation relating cause to effect, but there *has* to be such a relation if option two is to work.⁵² The same problem arises if you try to say that the conditions possess a causal power (1.4cd).
- Third, Nāgārjuna uses a version of the Argument from the Three Times in wondering *when* the effect produces the cause.⁵³ This can't happen *before* the effect exists, because it doesn't make sense to call something a cause when its effect does not yet exist – you might as well call it a *non-cause* (5cd) and non-existent objects can't have *any* sort of cause (6c). The effect can't produce the cause *after* the effect exists because there's no point of causing something that already exists (6d). Maybe there's a third

they can mean either identity and difference or causal independence and causal dependence (Hayes 1994, 312-315). To avoid attributing this fallacy to Nāgārjuna, Siderits follows Candrakīrti in seeing verse 3cd as a set up for the introduction of the idea of *kriyā* (activity, causal power) in verse four (Siderits 2004, 404; Siderits 2007, 194). Siderits then glosses the argument of 3cd as follows: “... since the intrinsic nature of the effect is not in the conditions, it will not do to say that the effect arises from something with a distinct nature (that the cause is *parabhāva* to the effect)” (Siderits 2004, 404). Siderits's linking of 3cd to verse four gives Nāgārjuna a way to avoid equivocating on identity and independence, since it shows how the two senses of *svabhāva* and *parabhāva* are in fact related: these terms consistently refer to the identity of the causes and effects (however, I don't think Siderits is right that the argument needs to show that causation is conceptually constructed to accomplish this). Rather than relying on an equivocal conceptual link between *svabhāva* and *parabhāva*, Siderits construes the argument as raising the issue of how the cause and effect are to be related if they are separate. If the first option (the effect arises from itself) were correct, it would be easy to see how causes cause their particular effects, since the cause and effect have the same essence; but the second option can't answer this question unless you bring in some sort of causal connection or causal power (*kriyā*). Of course, verse four argues against the concept of *kriyā* as well. For an alternative attempt to avoid Hayesian fallacies, see Taber 1998.

⁵¹ *kriyā na pratyayavatī nāpratyayavatī kriyā*. MMK 1.4ab.

⁵² My reading of this argument, especially the idea that it involves an infinite regress, has been inspired by Siderits and Garfield (Siderits 2004, 405-406, Siderits 2007, 194-195, Garfield 1995, 113-114). Westerhoff also sees an infinite regress, but of a different kind. For him, the infinite regress is that you can always add more objects to the “causal complex” that brought about the effect (Westerhoff 2009, 105-107).

⁵³ Here I am more-or-less following Siderits, who is in turn more-or-less following Candrakīrti in seeing the conclusion of an Argument from the Three Times in 1.7ab (Siderits 2004, 406-408, Siderits 2007, 195).

time in which the effect is coming into being and thus both exists and doesn't exist simultaneously. But this can't work (7ab) – how can something both exist and not exist at the same time especially if the Abhidharma theory of radical momentariness were true? If ultimately-existing things (*dharmas*⁵⁴) are fully existent in one moment and non-existent the next, this third time simply can't work.

Option Three: Perhaps an arisen being could arise through a combination of self-causation and from something else.⁵⁵ While Nāgārjuna doesn't deal with this option explicitly, he probably expects his audience to see that, given his arguments against options one and two, a combination of the two could not possibly work either.

Option Four: Maybe an arisen being arises from no cause at all.⁵⁶ Again, Nāgārjuna doesn't explicitly discuss this option, but we are presumably supposed to grasp for ourselves that this option is either absurd because it contradicts our experience or at the very least it won't work for any would-be causal theorist, since it gives no explanation at all for causes and conditions.

Nāgārjuna uses these arguments against the material cause (*hetu*), the object of a cognition (*ālambana*), the immediately preceding cause (*anantaram*), and the dominant

⁵⁴ In Abhidharma, the only things that ultimately exist are *dharmas*, which are impartite, momentary events or tropes with essences (*svabhāva*) that do not disappear when philosophically analyzed by a careful thinker. For more on *dharmas* in Abhidharma, see Siderits 2007, 111-113. Goodman (2004) plausibly argues that *dharmas* (at least as they are treated in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*) are similar to the contemporary metaphysical idea of tropes, which are neither substances nor universals.

⁵⁵ This is probably the option taken by Jain philosophers (Sullivan 1988, 91 and Westerhoff 2009, 109 n. 56). This makes sense because, as Westerhoff claims, "it coheres well with their multiperspectivalist outlook (*anekāntavāda*) to argue that the effect is already present in the cause *qua* its potentiality (*śakti*) but not *qua* its fully developed form" (Westerhoff 2009, 109 n. 56).

⁵⁶ Sullivan (1988, 91) claims this is the Cārvāka position. Westerhoff mentions that the Nikāyas place the Cārvākas in option two while modern commentators such as Murti and Kalupahana place the Cārvākas in option four (Westerhoff 2009, 104, 111 n. 60). I don't think either options two or four fit the Cārvāka view presented in the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*. There Mādhva has Cārvākas consider an objection that their view leads to the variety of things in the world being causeless or without explanation (*ākasmikaṃ*). The Cārvāka answer is: "If someone were to say that (*iti cet*), this is not valid, because the arising of that [variety] is just from its nature (*svabhāvāt*)" (SDS, p. 4). The idea that things arise from their own nature is corroborated by Cārvāka fragments found in other texts as well (Bhattacharya 2002, 604). This theory sounds more like option one than two or four. As I'll argue in chapter four, there were two other kinds of Cārvākas: the "more educated" Cārvākas that accepted a limited form of inference and skeptical Cārvākas exemplified by Jayarāśi. The differences of the "more educated" Cārvākas with the position of the SDS were more epistemological than metaphysical, so they probably accepted the Cārvāka causal theory presented in SDS. Jayarāśi, if I'm right, had no causal theory at all and would join Nāgārjuna in rejecting all four options. As for option four, it may be that Nāgārjuna has no specific opponent in mind, but rather he presents this option as a logical possibility to be considered – a common tactic in *prasaṅga* arguments.

cause (*adhipateyam*) in verses seven, eight, nine, and ten respectively. Verses 11-14 focus on similar issues concerning the effect (*phala*).

Having given my version of the structure of the argument, I will move to my second question: what is the point of this argument?

For many interpreters, the point of the argument is to rule out essentialist and realist theories of causation to make room for an alternative theory. Garfield is perhaps the clearest proponent of this type of interpretation in that he takes Nāgārjuna to be advocating for a theory of “conventionalist regularism” (Garfield 2002, 72).⁵⁷ Garfield claims that Nāgārjuna draws a distinction between causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*) in chapter one and that Nāgārjuna “argues against the existence of causes and for the existence of a variety of kinds of conditions” (Garfield 1995, 104).⁵⁸ According to Garfield, causes have essences and causal powers whereas conditions are merely conventional designations based on observed regularities in experience and don’t require us to posit any metaphysically extravagant entities such as occult causal powers; Nāgārjuna means to deny the existence of causes while both affirming the existence of and giving a theory of conditions.

Siderits does not see an important distinction between causes and conditions; instead he claims that the thesis of chapter one is that “the causal relation itself is conceptually constructed” (Siderits 2004, 393 – see also Siderits 2007, 199). That is, by showing that causes and conditions must lack essences (*svabhāva*) because such essences can’t meet the Abhidharma test of being findable under analysis, Nāgārjuna is demonstrating that what we count as a cause and an effect in a given situation is

⁵⁷ Garfield consistently endorses this interpretation throughout his work on Nāgārjuna. See Garfield 1995, 103-123; Garfield 2002, Chs. 1, 2, and 4; Garfield and Priest 2002.

⁵⁸ See note 48 above for criticisms of the idea that Nāgārjuna draws any such distinction.

determined by human interests, not anything with real causal powers. Nāgārjuna means for the conceptual construction of causal relations to imply that any entities that might count as causes or effects are themselves also conceptually constructed, thus sealing the deal on an anti-realist thesis of universal emptiness (Siderits 2004, 411-413). Westerhoff's view is quite similar: "Cause and effect have to be conceived of as both mutually dependent, as well as dependent on the cognizing subject, and therefore empty of *svabhāva*" (Westerhoff 2009, 113). Westerhoff also explicitly endorses Siderits's link between the conceptual construction of causal relations and the conceptual construction of entities (Westerhoff 2009, 124).

What all these interpretations have in common is that they take chapter one of the MMK to either contain or imply a theory about causation, one that Nāgārjuna accepts in the final analysis as a truth-claim about such phenomena. But I don't think either this chapter or the MMK in general either contain or imply such a theory. I have four reasons for this claim.

First, and perhaps most obviously, Nāgārjuna never develops or even explicitly mentions any such theory in chapter one. As far as I can tell, it's simply a negative *catuṣkoṭi* that denies four possible options for analyzing causation. But there is no positive theory about causation to be found.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, Siderits admits that no type of positive theory about causation is actually found in the MMK, although he attributes it to Bhāviveka and claims that it's the type of theory "a Mādhyamika should hold (at the conventional level, of course)" (Siderits 2004, 415 n. 18). I differ with Siderits in that I don't think a Mādhyamika

⁵⁹ One might object here that Nāgārjuna never explicitly discusses the two phases I have attributed to him either and that we need some additional ideas to interpret this difficult text. For my answer to this objection, see footnote 84 in section 3.6.

should hold such a theory, but I'll come back to this point when I discuss my fourth reason below. On the other hand, Garfield, who does seem to see such a theory in the text, says that his main reason for doing so is that “the entire doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness and the unity of the Two Truths developed in chapter 24 is already implicit in chapter 1 ... the entire doctrine developed in climatic character in chapter 24 is present in embryo in the first” (Garfield 2002, 41). An advocate of Garfield's interpretation would suggest that I have simply overlooked textual evidence from elsewhere in the MMK.

This leads to my second reason for denying that Nāgārjuna endorses a theory about causation: neither chapter 24 nor any other part of the MMK should be taken as evidence that Nāgārjuna ultimately accepts such a theory once we take phase two statements into account. Let's look at MMK 24.18, one of the most famous verses of the text and one of the main verses Garfield discusses in this context: “That which is dependent origination, and that which is designated based on having grasped something, that we call emptiness and the middle path itself” (MMK 24.18).⁶⁰ This does seem like a prime example of Nāgārjuna “stating positive views of his own” (Garfield and Priest 2002, 97). Here it might be thought that he's making a positive assertion about the identification of dependent origination, “that which is based on having grasped something” (*sā prajñaptir upādāya*), emptiness, and the middle path. The next verse even more clearly seems to present a positive theory about causation: “Because nothing which is not dependently originated is found, for that reason indeed nothing which is not empty is found” (MMK 24.19).⁶¹ This verse very much seems to endorse the link

⁶⁰ *yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmahe/
sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā//* MMK 24.18

⁶¹ *apratītya samutpanno dharmāḥ kaścīn na vidyate/
yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo hi dharmāḥ kaścīn na vidyate//* MMK 25.19

between dependent origination and emptiness that so many commentators point out, namely, that things are empty *because* they are dependently originated. Since dependent origination is the preeminent Buddhist theory of causation and Nāgārjuna says so much about it, it would seem to be undeniable that he has a positive view about it.

I agree that he does seem to present a view about dependent origination and emptiness. But only to a point. Those who see a positive, all-things-considered view about dependent origination in Nāgārjuna are themselves missing some key textual evidence, namely, the last two verses of the MMK (27.29-30) in which Nāgārjuna demonstrates that emptiness leads to the abandoning of all views, what I am calling phase two. If Nāgārjuna means what he says there, we should take everything he says that looks like a positive view about emptiness as a sort of provisional view that ought to be given up at some point.⁶² While he develops a provisional view about emptiness and its relation to causation and other matters in phase one, in phase two he demonstrates that this view undermines itself along with all others, leaving a skeptically-purged Mādhyamika without any philosophical views about causation or any other philosophical topic. While the development of views about emptiness is an important step in this process, it is not, as so many interpreters claim, the final step.

My third reason that Nāgārjuna should not be taken to be presenting a causal theory that he accepts as true in the final analysis has to do with comparative moves often made in the defense of such interpretations. While there are obvious resonances between

⁶² See MMK 13.8 in which those who hold a view about emptiness are said to be “incurable.” Also, there are passages in the *Ratnāvalī* in which Nāgārjuna argues against the existence of dependent origination (e.g., 1.37, 1.65, etc.). Frauwallner translates *Ratnāvalī* 1.37 as follows: “Since it (= the dependent becoming of the cycle of existences) cannot come about from itself, from something other, and from both, and this in all three time periods, the belief in an ‘I’ becomes invalid and thereby deed and birth also” (Frauwallner 2010, 223). Frauwallner takes this to mean, “Liberation takes place ... through recognition of the unreality of dependent origination...” (Frauwallner 2010, 217).

Nāgārjuna's treatment of causation and the treatments given by Sextus, Hume, and Wittgenstein, I'm not sure that these comparisons should take quite the shape they are often given in the contemporary literature. Therefore, these comparisons don't support the interpretations of Nāgārjuna they are adduced to support. Let me discuss just a few examples in far more brevity than they deserve.

Nāgārjuna's arguments in MMK 1 are somewhat similar to Sextus's arguments in PH 3.4-5; for instance, Sextus gives a version of the Argument from the Three Times. However, the overall structure of the argument is different: whereas Nāgārjuna brings up four possibilities and denies them all, Sextus argues both for and against the existence of causes in order to suspend judgment. Nonetheless, Garfield tries to read Sextus along the line of Nāgārjuna's alleged conventionalist regularism: he thinks the pro-cause argument appeals to observed regularities while the anti-cause argument appeals to conceptual problems with the connection between cause and effect. Putting these ideas together, Garfield asserts that Sextus's point is that the idea of real causal powers is not useful in everyday practice, although Garfield points out that neither he nor Sextus either assert or deny the *existence* of causal powers (Garfield 2002, 263-264 n. 18). While I admire Garfield's clever exegesis, I don't find it plausible that Sextus would make any particular claim about the necessity of causal ideas in everyday practice; rather, he would simply follow customs of causal language without making any philosophical claims about the utility of such language. More to the point, I think this interpretation and others that see a more constructive side to Pyrrhonism and Madhyamaka (e.g., Dreyfus and Garfield 2011) obscure the real point that Sextus and Nāgārjuna do share: that they use philosophical

arguments to cure their readers of the desire to do philosophy, a point that some other scholars point out effectively (e.g., Kuzminski 2008, Ch. 2, McEvelley 2002, Ch. 17).⁶³

Both Garfield and Siderits discuss comparisons with Hume. Garfield sees in Hume an analogue of his conventionalist regularism. Both Nāgārjuna and Hume fail to find any good reason for believing that our thinking about causal relations requires that we postulate secret causal powers; however, whereas in the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume explicitly puts forward an explanation of why we believe in causation *despite* its ultimate irrationality, I don't think Nāgārjuna gives such an explanation. Furthermore, Garfield asserts that both Hume and Nāgārjuna think that the idea of causal powers is "ultimately incoherent" (Garfield 2002, 18); this is true for Nāgārjuna (in MMK, Ch. 1), but as far as I can tell, Hume never claims that the idea of a causal power is incoherent.⁶⁴ Also, Garfield says that Nāgārjuna has "an account of explanation and causation that, like Hume's, grounds ontology in the conventions that underlie our explanatory interests and the sortals we choose under which to collect entities, and not in a self-evident or self-presenting partition of nature into things, properties, and relations" (Garfield 2002, 73). I'm not entirely sure what it means to "ground ontology" in conventions, but I suspect it would be similar to Siderits's

⁶³ Kuzminski and McEvelley, however, see more similarity in the structure of the arguments than I do, although I agree with their assessment of the overall point of the arguments for both Sextus and Nāgārjuna. I agree with Burton that the structures of Pyrrhonian and Madhyamaka arguments are quite different: Pyrrhonists demonstrate the equal convincingness (*isosthenia*) of two opposing views and Mādhyamikas reject all the positions considered (Burton 1999, 39-40). This does not, however, mean Burton is right that Madhyamaka is not a type of skepticism. It is simply a different type of skepticism in that it leads to similar results via different means. Another interesting comparison of Sextus and Nāgārjuna is Grenier 1970. Hayes compares Pyrrhonism with skeptical strands of Buddhism in general with Nāgārjuna as a particular example (Hayes 1988a, 51-62). Matilal compares Sextus to what he calls the "Sāñjaya-Nāgārjuna tradition" of Indian skepticism (Matilal 1986, 67).

⁶⁴ On this point (and many others concerning Hume) I agree with Robert Fogelin: "Of course, Hume is not a conceptual skeptic in this area. He nowhere suggests that our inductive inferences are unintelligible. Nor does he suggest this with respect to notions of causality and necessary connection" (Fogelin 1985, 46).

anti-realist contention that causation is not a feature of ultimate reality and that causal language depends on human interests. While I have argued that I don't think this is Nāgārjuna's view, I don't think it's Hume's view either. I read Hume as an epistemological skeptic about whether we *know* there are causal powers or not, since he nowhere either affirms or denies their existence. Some recent scholars even think he accepts – or at least doesn't doubt – the *existence* of causal powers.⁶⁵ Siderits sees that Humean skepticism differs from Nāgārjunian anti-realism, claiming that Nāgārjuna “is not talking about whether we can know when there is a causal connection. He is talking about whether there is such a thing as causal connection. That's a very different matter” (Siderits 2007, 199).⁶⁶ The problem here, however, is that I don't think Nāgārjuna is dogmatically denying the existence of causal powers either. He's simply showing that most if not all of our theories about causal powers are incoherent. This is not the same as Hume's epistemological argument against knowledge of causation, but neither is it a straightforward metaphysical argument. As I see it, Nāgārjuna's arguments about

⁶⁵ In the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section Four, Hume explains his goal as follows: “If we would satisfy ourselves, therefore, concerning the nature of that evidence which assures us of matters of fact, we must inquire how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect.” Note that he is not seeking an answer to a metaphysical question of whether cause and effect actually exist. See also Section Four, Part Two, where he discusses causes as “secret powers” and claims “... there is no known connection between the sensible qualities and the secret powers...” Some scholars see important differences between Hume's treatment of causation in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* (see Baier 1991, Ch. 3 and Fogelin 1985, Ch. 4). An interesting recent development in Hume scholarship is “the New Hume interpretation” of skeptical realism, according to which Hume actually accepts (or at least doesn't doubt) the *existence* of causal powers and merely doubts that we know anything about the causal powers that are there. Some proponents of this interpretation are Galen Strawson, John Wright, and Janet Broughten (see Read and Richman 2007 for an anthology on this interpretive debate). In any case, the subtleties of Hume scholarship are beyond my purpose here. I merely mean to point to some of the issues.

⁶⁶ However, elsewhere Siderits claims that Hume agreed that “the causal relation is conceptually constructed” (Siderits 2004, 409). This isn't quite right if it means that Hume denies the existence of causes, but maybe Siderits means that Hume's explanation of why we believe in causes and effects is due to conceptual construction based on observation of constant conjunction.

causation constitute a kind of *conceptual* skepticism⁶⁷ intended to demonstrate the difficulties inherent in our theories about causation – even if these arguments did have metaphysical implications, such implications would dissolve in phase two.

As for Wittgenstein, Garfield's main comparison has to do with Wittgenstein's thoughts about the concept of a causal explanation in the *Tractatus* 6.371 and 6.372 and the general concept of explanation in *On Certainty* 204 and 344 (Garfield 1995, 114 and Garfield 2002, 10). Garfield sees this as an analogue to Nāgārjunian conventionalist regularism because Wittgenstein is pointing out, "The addition of a causal cement between the cause and effect can add nothing explanatory to an explanation" (Garfield 2002, 21) and Wittgenstein develops a theory that all our talk of causal explanations is based on observed regularities and human conventions. I think this emphasis on constructive philosophy somewhat obscures the real commonality between Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna in their therapeutic attitude toward their own philosophical practices. While they recommend different therapies – Nāgārjuna attacks *svabhāva* and Wittgenstein reminds philosophers of the everyday use of language – their therapeutic aims are quite similar in that the philosophical therapy is meant to undermine the philosophical impulse itself.⁶⁸ Garfield does mention this therapeutic commonality (Garfield 2002, 13), but as Dreyfus points out there's a tension between skepticism and constructive philosophy because constructive philosophy often contains the very truth-claims for which skeptics offer therapy (Dreyfus 2011, 94).

⁶⁷ For more on the distinction between epistemological and conceptual skepticism, see Fogelin 1985, Ch. 1 and Garrett 2004.

⁶⁸ Another comparison of Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna on causation can be found in Gudmunsen 1977, Ch. 6.

All this gives some support for Dreyfus's contention that "when we scrutinize more closely the cross-cultural family drawn together by Garfield, we cannot but wonder whether it is as happily united as he wants us to believe" (Dreyfus 2011, 94).⁶⁹ While neither I nor the interpreters discussed above think any comparison with any Western philosopher should uniquely determine our interpretation of Nāgārjuna, such comparisons can sometimes help. Nonetheless, as fun and interesting as such comparisons can be, we should be aware that they may sometimes lead us astray as I think the examples just given have shown.⁷⁰

My fourth and final reason for denying that Nāgārjuna ultimately accepts any theory about causation is that such interpretations cannot make sense of why Nāgārjuna would have made phase two statements. If Nāgārjuna meant for us to accept some theory about conventions, regularity, or conceptual construction, one wonders why he would not have simply said so and left it at that. There would be no point in going the extra step to tell us that theories of emptiness undermine themselves. Now, it could be the case that Nāgārjuna didn't really mean what he said or that he didn't mean for those statements to be taken straightforwardly (perhaps he meant "all *false* views" or "I have no *essentialist* thesis"). But I have attempted to see what happens when we take him at his word. Supposing he really did mean just what he said, there are no final theories about causes and conditions to be found – that is precisely the point.

⁶⁹ Another strange thing about Garfield's comparisons is I don't think he ever mentions that he takes Nāgārjuna to be denying the existence of causes whereas he sometimes admits that neither he nor Sextus nor Hume deny their existence.

⁷⁰ For a critical take on comparisons of Nāgārjuna with Western philosophers, see Tuck 1990. Of course, I admit that my own interpretations of Sextus, Hume, Wittgenstein, and Nāgārjuna color my take on all of this as well.

This is why I have chosen to translate the verb *vidyate* as “is found” throughout Nāgārjuna’s writings as opposed to “exists.”⁷¹ Nāgārjuna is showing us what happens conceptually and psychologically when we try to find some basis for a philosophical theory. He spends so much time on causation because that is one of the surest routes to dogmatic attachment to views in Nāgārjuna’s day as in our own. Such dogmatism would be especially acute in the context where causal theories of dependent origination were among dozens of competing classical Indian theories meant to account for everything from plant growth and fire to rebirth and the beginning (or beginninglessness) of the universe. I haven’t discussed mystical interpretations in this section because mystical interpreters would presumably agree with me that there is no positive causal theory Nāgārjuna wants us to accept at the end of the day. However, I part ways with interpreters who claim that Nāgārjuna supports some kind of “non-conceptual intuitional knowledge” (Murti 1955, 300) or that “his arguments serve only to describe the interconnectedness, hence illusoriness, of all phenomena, not establish it as true” (Taber 1998, 237). I see nothing in the text that suggests any replacement for discursive philosophical theorizing about causality or other matters. That Nāgārjuna was offering an escape from such metaphysical attempts rather than any sort of replacement for them – whether it be conventionalist regularism, anti-realism, or mystical intuition – is supported by taking phase two statements seriously.

⁷¹ The issue is that the verbal root \sqrt{vid} in the passive or middle voice can mean any of the following: “to be found, exist, be ... there is, there exists” (Monier-Williams 1994, 965). For instance, I have translated MMK 1.3cd as “If its own essence (*svabhāva*) is not found (*avidyamāne*), then the essence of the other (*parabhāva*) is not found (*vidyate*)” rather than “If its own essence (*svabhāva*) does not exist (*vidyamāne*), then the essence of the other (*parabhāva*) does not exist (*vidyate*).” There is little agreement on this issue among English translations. Kalupahana 1986 tends to translate it as “is evident.” Inada 1970, Sprung 1979, and Stcherbatsky 1968 most often opt for “exists” or “there is.” Siderits and Katsura 2006 and Garfield 1995 tend toward a greater variety of translations in different verses (although Garfield is translating from Tibetan translations). McGagney 1997 most often translates it as “occurs.”

3.6 Why critique epistemology?: Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti versus *pramānavāda*

Just as skeptical Mādhyamikas employ conceptual arguments against metaphysics, so do they employ conceptual arguments against epistemology. The most specific criticisms of epistemology occur in Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV)⁷² and in the introduction of Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* (PP). In this section, I'll concentrate on the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* with some comments on the *Prasannapadā* at the end.

The critique of epistemology in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (hereafter VV) takes place from verses 31-51. In these verses Nāgārjuna is responding to the Nyāya objection that if the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) are empty of essence, they can't perform their function of bringing about knowledge and thus Nāgārjuna can't possibly give any good reason to believe that all things are empty (VV 5-6).⁷³ I will try to answer two questions about this section. First, what is the argument? And second, what is the point of this argument? In understanding the argument, let's 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*,

⁷² While some scholars (e.g., Ruegg 1981, 21-23, Lindtner 1982, 70-72) have taken the VV to be an authentic work of Nāgārjuna, others have doubted its authenticity. Tola and Dragonetti (1998) argue that the VV is inauthentic for several reasons. One reason is its similarity to the *Vaidalyraprakaraṇa* (another text that some scholars, e.g., Pind 2001, argue is not authentic). Also, Tola and Dragonetti point out that the VV includes several terms, such as *pramāṇa* and *prameya*, not found in the MMK (Tola and Dragonetti 1998, 158). I'm inclined to agree with Westerhoff (2010, 6-9) that Tola and Dragonetti's argument is far from conclusive. For instance, Westerhoff argues that if Tola and Dragonetti were convincing, "one would have to assume that an author generally discusses the same problems in all his works and that he generally uses examples in the same way" (Westerhoff 2010, 8). Nonetheless, I don't want to enter into the debate about the VV's authenticity here. For my purposes I will assume that "Nāgārjuna" refers to the author of the MMK and VV, with the proviso that even if the VV had a different author, my skeptical interpretation can still make sense of both texts.

⁷³ For more discussion of this objection, see Siderits 1980, 308-309 and Westerhoff 2010, 66-68.

nor by the *prameyas* (objects of knowledge), nor even without any reason at all” (VV 51).⁷⁴ Perhaps we can call this a “*pañcakoti!*”

The argument of the preceding verses is intended to support this conclusion and takes the form of a *prasaṅga* argument. The order of these options in the preceding text is a bit different than the order stated in the conclusion. Here is an outline of the argument from verses 31-51.

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).⁷⁵ 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).⁷⁶

Option Four: Perhaps the *pramāṇas* are mutually established either by *pramāṇas* of the same kind or other kinds (this option doesn’t get its own verse, but 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 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.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ *naiva svataḥ prasiddhir na parasparataḥ parapramāṇair vā/
na bhavati na ca prameyair na cāpy akasmāt pramāṇānām// (VV 51)*

⁷⁵ For elucidations of the somewhat obscure arguments in verses 34-39, see Siderits 1980, 313-314 and Westerhoff 2010, 74-80.

⁷⁶ *yato bhavati no ‘tra saṁdehaḥ// (VV 51d).*

⁷⁷ 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*.

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 in all of these is: how do we know the truth about something? Agrippa's Trilemma allows three possible answers: First, we can make a brute assumption and refuse to keep justifying. Second, we can appeal to a second thing and then use the first claim to support the second in a circle. Third, we can keep appealing to some additional thing, which leads to an infinite regress.⁷⁸ The "Five Modes" call the three horns of Agrippa's Trilemma the Modes of Hypothesis, Circularity, and Infinite Regress, adding also the Modes deriving from Dispute and Relativity (PH 1.15).⁷⁹ Nāgārjuna's Option One above is like the Mode of Infinite Regress, Options Two and Five are like the Mode of Hypothesis, Option Three is like the Mode of Circularity, and Option Four is a combination of Circularity and Infinite Regress. For Pyrrhonian skeptics, these arguments were meant to lead skeptics to suspend judgment about philosophical matters (PH 1.13-17, Williams 1988). For contemporary epistemologists⁸⁰, similar considerations constitute a theoretical problem in epistemology 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). The problem is that while it might seem you need to

⁷⁸ For contemporary work on Agrippa's Trilemma, see Williams 1996, 60-68 and Klein 2003. Although Williams never explicitly says so, his Wittgensteinian-style contextualism and "methodological necessities" strongly 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 embedded. Klein, on the other hand, takes a position he calls "infinitism," 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).

⁷⁹ Williams thinks the additional two modes "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).

⁸⁰ See Chisholm 1957, Ch. 3, Chisholm 1977, Ch. 7, and Fumerton 2008 for contemporary treatments of the problem of the criterion.

answer the first question about the extent of knowledge to answer the second about the criteria, it would also seem that you need to answer the second in order to answer the first. Hence, a vicious circularity ensues. 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).⁸¹ There are two typical answers to this problem: the “particularist” answer appeals to things we know and tries to derive a criterion from those specific cases of knowledge (much like deriving the *pramāṇas* from the *prameyas*) and the “generalist/methodist” answer that seeks to provide a general criterion first and then a specific answer (like finding the *pramāṇas* first and then the *prameyas*).⁸² As I will show, these comparisons can help us in considering why Nāgārjuna made his arguments in the first place.

Let’s turn now to my second question: what’s the point of Nāgārjuna’s argument?

Jan Westerhoff takes the point to be that of arguing for a positive epistemological theory: “an epistemological theory that incorporates empty epistemic instruments” (Westerhoff

⁸¹ 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 seems to discuss the first sense while Chisholm 1957 seems to discuss the second. The concern with *pramāṇas* in classical Indian epistemology is more in line with the first sense of identifying the sources of knowledge.

⁸² For more on this distinction, see Fumerton 2008, 36. 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). While many internalists such as Chisholm have been particularists that start with common-sense considerations about particular beliefs we take to constitute knowledge, 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).

2010, 69), one that rejects foundationalism in favor of contextualism (Westerhoff 2010, 82). According to Westerhoff, Nāgārjuna actually accepts an epistemology in which *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* are mutually established as can be seen by a “philosophically more substantial” interpretation of verses 42-48.

The argument is something like this (Westerhoff 2010, 86-87):

1. We start with a coherence theory of justification (as suggested in verse 48), in which the interplay between initially unjustified assumptions and coherence relations between beliefs constitute 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 is true.

Westerhoff sees verse 48 as a hypothesis of a coherence theory of justification. On this theory 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. In other words, one puts forward an unjustified assumption, tests it against one’s web of belief, adjusts the belief and/or the web accordingly, and so on. In this case, there is no room for any sort of realist correspondence between our beliefs and mind-independent reality and the very notion of “mind-independent reality” allegedly ceases to be a coherent notion (much along the lines of the type of 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. Hence, this argument constitutes an argument for the thesis of universal emptiness.

While I don't find this argument very persuasive⁸³, my concern here is not whether it's a good argument, but whether it's the argument given by Nāgārjuna. If what I have sketched above is the argument Westerhoff wants to attribute to Nāgārjuna, I have four criticisms of doing so. First, Nāgārjuna never actually *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 would seem to be reading deep between the lines to find it.⁸⁴ Second, I don't think we need to attribute any such theory to Nāgārjuna in order to make sense of the text and in fact the text makes a great deal more sense if we don't do so. Third, the arguments in this section are *prasaṅga* arguments. Why does Westerhoff think that Nāgārjuna is arguing for any positive conclusion there? 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. Fourth, it seems to me that the thesis of universal emptiness can't be established epistemically. This fourth objection is a controversial point. I'll come back to it after I say a bit about my take on the argument.

⁸³ 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 don't think it does that either, because it's not clear that the concept of correspondence to mind-independent reality couldn't 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 doesn't follow from the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to know whether our beliefs correspond to a mind-independent reality. While it may be the case that we can't *know* whether our coherent web of beliefs corresponds to the world, the question of whether this web actually does correspond still makes perfect sense.

⁸⁴ Someone might object that even my skeptical interpretation relies on a distinction between phases one and two, which is 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.

In opposition to Westerhoff, I agree with Matilal's characterization of what's going on here:

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 a sort of 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 against *pramāṇas* as sources of knowledge:

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)

That considerations strikingly similar to Nāgārjuna's have also arisen in both Hellenistic and contemporary philosophy and that such considerations are problems for any sort of epistemological project in general should give some at least partial evidence concerning Nāgārjuna's intentions.

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 parts of

30-51) offer hints of the “relinquishment of all views.” The attack on epistemology in 30-51 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. As I will discuss shortly, Candrakīrti uses similar arguments against Dignāga’s epistemology.

The VV is predominantly in service of phase one (arguing in favor of emptiness, arguing against Nyāya realism, etc.), but the tie to phase two is that the ultimate target of all this is dogmatic attachment. Realist ontology and epistemology happen to be some of the main 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 itself (as in MMK 13.8), and it’s hard for me to see how attributing a positive view (anti-realism, contextualism, etc.) to Madhyamaka can avoid causing attachment to emptiness itself.

A contextualist, empty epistemology might work conventionally, but even that 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 would presumably 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. On an anti-realist interpretation Nāgārjuna doesn’t explicitly discuss this theory because his primary aim

here is to argue against Nyāya epistemology. He leaves his readers to understand that he has an opposing positive epistemological theory. On my skeptical interpretation the reason for Nāgārjuna’s reticence about positive epistemological theory-building is more straightforward: he simply doesn’t have any positive epistemological theory.

My fourth criticism of Westerhoff above was that contrary to Westerhoff’s claims, a thesis of universal emptiness cannot be established even by empty *pramāṇas*. My reason for saying that is most clearly captured by a *prasaṅga* argument against Westerhoff’s claim 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.
- C: Hence, there is a contradiction and universal emptiness cannot be established.⁸⁵

This is a problem for Westerhoff’s interpretation, 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). However, I also think this is a serious problem for any interpretation that takes Mādhyamikas to be making a truth-claim about universal emptiness and that takes emptiness to imply the sort of contextualist theory of justification found in the first premise. The above argument presents such interpreters

⁸⁵ 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 pervasive intellectual apprehension” that knowledge is impossible (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).

with a dilemma: either they must admit that Mādhyamikas are committed to a thesis for which they have arguments that are necessarily insufficient due to a self-referential 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.⁸⁶

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 – the fact that such arguments are self-undermining is the point. The thesis of universal emptiness, which is vigorously defended in phase one, is specifically designed to undermine itself in phase two. Far from being a problem as it is for many other interpretations, for my 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.

Earlier I showed that the structure of the VV's critique of epistemology resembles the structures of Agrippa's Trilemma and Agrippa's Five Modes as well as an issue called the problem of the criterion. At this point I would like to consider what the similarities in structure can tell us about similarities in purpose.

Pyrrhonians use Agrippa's Trilemma and the Five Modes for the purpose of suspending judgment on epistemological questions rather than establishing any theory. On the other hand, modern and contemporary versions of epistemological skepticism use

⁸⁶ 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 dialetheism logic. However, 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, as I will argue in chapter five, I think Priest's dialetheism does uncover something about the structure of philosophical thought that Nāgārjuna, Sextus, Jayarāsi, and other skeptics exploit for their own ends.

many of the same Pyrrhonian arguments for the very different purpose of establishing a skeptical epistemological theory that consists in a denial of the possibility of knowledge in some or all areas. This is also precisely the skeptical threat posed by the problem of the criterion in contemporary epistemology: if we are unable to establish either a general criterion or any specific cases of knowledge, we should conclude that knowledge is impossible. Thus, the Western versions of these issues use them for two very different purposes: the suspension of judgment and eschewing of positive epistemological theory characteristic of metaphilosophical skepticism and the assertion of a theory that knowledge is impossible characteristic of epistemological skepticism. Which kind of purpose is closer to Nāgārjuna's?

Should we see Nāgārjuna as an epistemological skeptic, namely, as a skeptic who asserts a thesis that knowledge is impossible? Matilal, for instance, sometimes seems to claim that Nāgārjuna is this type of skeptic.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Consider the quote I cited in section 3.1 in discussing Matilal's vacillation between different types of skepticism: "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.

⁸⁸ 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).

Here I would appeal to what I am calling phase two statements. As I indicated earlier, phase two statements are very similar to Pyrrhonian claims to have no beliefs. Like Sextus, Nāgārjuna is not a straightforward epistemological skeptic who denies the possibility of knowledge, because that interpretation would make no sense of his statements concerning positionlessness and thesislessness. If we want to take Nāgārjuna at his word in those types of statements, he simply can't be an epistemological skeptic, whereas, as the example of Sextus shows, this is precisely the kind of thing a metaphilosophical skeptic would say. Thus, metaphilosophical skepticism makes better sense of the text.

Anti-realist interpreters would probably object that I have misconstrued the scope of Nāgārjuna's target to include epistemology in general rather than simply realist epistemologies such as Nyāya. Maybe the problems Nāgārjuna raises are problems for realist epistemology, but not for epistemology in general. Siderits, for example, claims that there are two alternatives when it comes to making sense of Nāgārjuna's critique of epistemology. First, we could take Nāgārjuna to be a mystic who demonstrates the invalidity of anything we take to be a *pramāṇa* in order to see that "reality as such is ineffable and not discursively apprehendable" (Siderits 1980, 319). Second, we could take Nāgārjuna to be making the point that

the epistemological enterprise, *as conceived by Naiyāyikas*, cannot be carried to completion. On this interpretation the problem lies not in the notion of *pramāṇa* as such, but in the notion of a *pramāṇa* as a means of attaining a true characterization of a set of independently existing reals. (Siderits 1980, 319)

While Siderits doesn't use the term "anti-realism" for this interpretation, it's clear that he is thinking of the critique of epistemology as serving what he takes to be Nāgārjuna's

overall anti-realist point. Siderits argues that we should take Nāgārjuna to be making this second claim because “they support only the second, weaker claim ... that a theory of pramāṇas cannot be employed in defense of some metaphysical thesis, insofar as such a theory cannot be constructed independently of some set of presuppositions concerning the nature of the objects of knowledge” (Siderits 1980, 320). He says that this claim is weaker in an epistemological sense, but is in fact stronger in a metaphysical sense (Siderits 1980, 335 n. 7).

I agree with Siderits that the arguments in VV 31-50 do not support a mystical conclusion (although I suspect that mystical interpreters don't think *any* reasoning directly supports mystical insights!). However, I don't think they support an anti-realist conclusion either. I don't think it's possible to give a coherent argument for a thesis of universal emptiness, as I demonstrated in my *prasaṅga* against Westerhoff. While it is possible Nāgārjuna intended to support an anti-realist affirmation of universal emptiness and simply failed to give an adequate argument, I don't see any reason to attribute to Nāgārjuna an anti-realist epistemology.

Perhaps Siderits would be on solid footing if there were only the two possibilities he outlines: mysticism and anti-realism. But there is a third option: it could be that Nāgārjuna is not making any claim at all either about mystical ineffable reality or about the incoherence of the concept of mind-independent reality. It could be that he is giving a *prasaṅga* argument against Naiyāyikas, not because they are realists, but because they are attempting to develop epistemological theories at all. On this view, Siderits's option is in fact the stronger one in that it attributes a claim to Nāgārjuna at all.

There are several things to be said in favor of this third skeptical option. First, like the overall interpretation of metaphilosophical skepticism, it makes more sense of phase two statements, which do occur in the VV as well (VV 29, for example). 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 saw this as a crucial step toward the goal of Madhyamaka philosophy. 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). According to my view, Nāgārjuna does at the end of the day 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 to other epistemological theories. Not only do they show up in Western philosophy, but Candrakīrti applied at least one of them (the threat of infinite regress) to Dignāga's epistemology – since Dignāga was not a realist how could realism be the target of the Madhyamaka critique?⁸⁹ Fourth, Nāgārjuna never says anything about developing any sort of epistemology even as a basic description of our epistemic practices.

It might seem that I've been a little hard on anti-realist interpretations. After all, when I outlined my own interpretation I asserted that something very much like anti-realism is at work in phase one and that you can't get to phase two without going through phase one. Why couldn't an anti-realist epistemology be provisionally accepted as part of phase one? I agree that it could be, even though Nāgārjuna never said anything about

⁸⁹ Siderits claims that, while Dignāga was not a metaphysical realist like Naiyāyikas, Candrakīrti's criticism is that Dignāga is still tied to metaphysics. Thus, Candrakīrti's point is that "the possibility of systematic epistemology is inextricably bound up with the possibility of metaphysics" (Siderits 1981, 157-158).

such positive theories (a fact that ought to give pause to those who would saddle him with these theories). Certainly many later Mādhyamikas, such as Bhāviveka and Tsongkhapa, developed constructive epistemological theories. My disagreement concerns that status of such theories. As provisional steps on the way to the emptiness of emptiness and the relinquishing of all views, such theories might provide needed therapy. But it seems to me that such theorizing often leads to dogmatism by other means. It's harder to give up all views when you're busy developing new views of your own. I am simply incredulous that philosophers making phase two statements with a straight face would be all that interested in constructive philosophy.

Nonetheless, many interpreters see an endorsement of constructive Madhyamaka philosophy in Candrakīrti's critique of Dignāga's epistemology. While I won't discuss the entirety of Candrakīrti's critique here, I think that some discussion of the overall purpose of this section should allow readers to see how Candrakīrti's individual arguments fall into place.

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, p. 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), and he continues in some detail to apply similar concerns to the problem of how the *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* are defined (*lakṣaṇa*). 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*.⁹⁰ But here I would like to remain concentrated on the passage quoted above, since I think it tells us a lot about what Candrakīrti takes himself to be doing in his critique of Dignāga.

In the passage above, Candrakīrti seems to deny that ordinary people (*loka*) are in error about their everyday epistemic practice. Many readers of Candrakīrti take this passage, among others, 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

⁹⁰ I will discuss Dignāga’s epistemology in more detail in the next chapter in section 4.3. 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). In chapter four, section 4.5, I will discuss one of Jayarāśi’s arguments, The Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument, that is quite similar to this argument of Candrakīrti’s.

endorsement of a contextualist, coherentist epistemology of empty *pramāṇas* (Westerhoff 2010, 69, 82).

While I greatly respect all of these scholars, I think they've been taken in. They've been led astray by the cleverness of Candrakīrti's arguments and take his criticisms a little too seriously. I'd like to suggest that there is another possibility: Candrakīrti's discussions of conventional practice are themselves purely therapeutic and 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 don't think there would be much to say. Human beings can master conventions by imitation and everyday instruction, but we simply don't need philosophers to come around to "explain" this practice to us. I think this is precisely Candrakīrti's point, a point he shares with Jayarāśi. 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.⁹¹ But then it just doesn't make sense that Candrakīrti would decry Dignāgans for thinking they can instruct ordinary people while simultaneously thinking *he* could instruct ordinary people in what

⁹¹ I agree with Hayes 1988a 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 stick with conventional practice. Hayes (personal communication) has suggested to me 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 PVin 1.

they already do quite well. This would be like an amateur basketball fan wanting to teach Michael Jordan how to dribble (that many sports fans actually do this sort of thing makes it no less irrational!). 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).⁹² I'm not trying to draw any strong comparison between Wittgenstein and Candrakīrti⁹³, but if 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.

⁹² 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. A related issue is the extent to which Wittgenstein can be compared with Pyrrhonism. 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. I obviously can't solve interpretive difficulties of a philosopher as difficult as Wittgenstein here, so I'll just note that the type of therapy I'm attributing to Candrakīrti is more like the pure type of Kuusela and Fogelin that does not require attributing any positive theory to the therapist.

⁹³ See Gudmunsen 1977 for a more in-depth comparison of Wittgenstein and Buddhist philosophers, especially Nāgārjuna. While I can't 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'm not so sure either philosopher has any designs on constructive philosophy. One further point of comparison 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.

Second, my skeptical interpretation can make more sense of why Candrakīrti brings up 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 that “these are established by mutual dependence” (PP, p. 25, lines 21-26).⁹⁴ He ends this section by saying, “Therefore, let these very worldly things be as they are experienced” (PP, p. 25, line 27).⁹⁵ 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, p. 20, line 18).⁹⁶ 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

⁹⁴ *tāni ca parasparāpekṣayā sidhyanti*. PP, p. 25, line 26.

⁹⁵ *tasmāl laukikam evāstu yathādr̥ṣtam iti*. PP, p. 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. No doubt Siderits would 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 Madhyamaka sense deriving from the much-despised *svabhāva*, but is simply the view that opposes the Naiyāyikas’ mutual establishing.

⁹⁶ *api ca/ yadi pramāṇādhiṇaḥ prameyādhiḥ gamaḥ, tāni pramāṇāni kena paricchanta ity ādinā vigrahavyāvartanyām vihito doṣaḥ/* PP, p. 20, line 18.

1981, 157). But why take it as an “endorsement” at all? A 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 Dignāgans are too attached to their stark, non-commonsensical epistemology, one way to lessen this attachment is to show them that an epistemology that at least professes to be commonsensical is just as good, if not better. Such a procedure of therapeutic counter-argument is in the Pyrrhonian and Jayarāśian bags of tricks. I maintain that it is also in Candrakīrti’s. On my model, 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 phase two.

Third, Candrakīrti follows Nāgārjuna in making both phase one and phase two statements. In his commentary on phase two statements in 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 metaphilosophical 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 helps us move from phase one to phase two.

My concern here has not been to evaluate these arguments (which is a worthwhile task taken up by others⁹⁷), but rather to engage with the more preliminary question of what Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti intend their arguments to do in the first place. To sum up my conclusion of the last two sections, I have shown how my skeptical interpretation can account for Madhyamaka arguments against theories of causality and against epistemology without thereby putting forward any positive theories in these areas of central philosophical concern. I haven't said much about mystical interpreters, but while they would agree with me that Nāgārjuna has in the end no positive theories about causality or epistemology, they see the texts as attempting to engender some kind of mystical insight, an idea for which there is little if any textual evidence (see section 3.2). Rather, skeptical Mādhyamikas use *prasaṅga* arguments, therapeutic counter-arguments, and other argumentative strategies 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.

3.7 Buddhist skepticism: Religiosity without belief

At this point an incredulous reader may wonder how Nāgārjuna could possibly be a *Buddhist* philosopher if he is also a metaphilosophical skeptic. It may seem that any interpretation of Nāgārjuna that has little, if any, relation to Buddhist soteriological goals of gaining knowledge of the true nature of reality is completely off-track if it is supposed to account for such an important philosopher in the Buddhist tradition. More generally, one may also wonder how he could be religious in any meaningful sense if his goal is to

⁹⁷ For just a few examples of more evaluative approaches, see Hayes 1994, Taber 1998, Tillemans 2007, and Burton 1999.

eschew *all* beliefs of a philosophical or religious nature. These are common and worthwhile objections. I will respond to them in turn.

The first objection is that my interpretation, in which Nāgārjuna's goal is to pacify our tendency to engage in conceptualization, neglects other very Buddhist goals of insight into the true nature of reality, knowledge of things as they are, and the notion of Right View as one of the parts of the Eightfold Path. In other words, it might be thought that no Buddhist can be a skeptic of this sort since a Buddhist must aim for some kind of liberating knowledge. It is probably the persistence of objections such as this that makes it so difficult for many interpreters to take phase two seriously as something a Buddhist would do while still remaining a Buddhist, leading such interpreters to posit anti-realist conclusions or mystical apprehension as what it is that liberated Buddhists come to know.

My response is that the two phases of Nāgārjuna's philosophical practice are representations of two tendencies that have been present in Buddhist philosophy from the very beginning. As Steven Collins points out, "One approach to the attainment of the 'emptiness' of *nibbāna*, naturally, was a direct assault on any form of conceptualization, any view whatsoever ... The other approach ... was to proceed through an analysis of what does have conceptual content, in order to classify it into known categories; the ability to classify any experience or concept into a known, non-valued impersonal category was held to be a technique for avoiding desire for the object thus classified" (Collins 1982, 113).⁹⁸ This second tendency is the more popular one in which the

⁹⁸ For another example of Early Buddhist quietism, see the following line from the *Sutta Nipāta*: "(only) when a man renounces all opinions, does he make no quarrel with the world" (Collins 1982, 130). Also, Richard Hayes has identified a kind of skepticism within the Buddhist tradition from the Nikāyas up until at least Dignāga; Hayes calls this "skeptical rationalism ... according to which there is no knowledge aside from that which meets the test of logical consistency, and moreover very few of our beliefs meet this test"

purpose of Buddhism is to decrease desire through insight into the true nature of reality. The other tendency is what Collins calls “Quietism,” which is “an attitude which emphasizes passivity in religious practice, and which seeks to attain as its final goal a state of beatific ‘inner quiet’” (Collins 1982, 139). Similarly, Paul Fuller suggests that there are two main ways of understanding the role of views (*diṭṭhi*) in early Buddhism: the opposition understanding, in which right views are opposed to wrong views, and the no-view understanding, in which the goal is to avoid all views whatsoever (Fuller 2005, 1).⁹⁹

My skeptical interpretation shows Nāgārjuna’s innovation in bringing these two phases together. Nāgārjuna transforms this uneasy dichotomy into a cohesive dialectical practice: he tries to show that the practice of analysis, when pursued all the way to the emptiness of emptiness, can be used as a means to the practice of making an assault on conceptualization itself, which is a rather extreme form of skepticism. Thus, on my interpretation, Nāgārjuna is, while a reformer and innovator, working quite entirely within Buddhist parameters by synchronizing two seemingly disparate strands of Buddhist philosophy.

(Hayes 1988a, 41). Hayes also claims that Nāgārjuna exemplified this type of skepticism (Hayes 1988a, 52-62).

⁹⁹ Fuller’s concern is more with modern interpretations that the early Buddhist tradition has a single attitude toward views, rather than Collins’s and my understanding that the tradition contains both attitudes. Also, Fuller argues against both the opposition and no-view understandings: “the opposition understanding is challenged because there is not an opposition between wrong-view and right-view as incorrect and correct truth claims but an opposition between craving and the cessation of craving. ... the rejection of all views is not being advised, but the abandoning of craving and attachment to views ... The early texts do not reject knowledge, but attachment to knowledge” (Fuller 2005, 8). Fuller argues in favor of what he calls the “transcendence of views,” which is a “different order of seeing” in which right view “apprehends how things are *and* is a remedy for craving” (Fuller 2005, 157).

The second objection is more general: how could a metaphilosophical skeptic possibly be religious in any meaningful sense? Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist philosopher and as such, one would expect his text to serve some religious purpose, such as the philosophical elucidation of religious beliefs or a defense of religious practices.

A skeptical interpretation of Madhyamaka shows that the radical program of purging oneself of philosophical views is an interpretation of the Buddhist goal of non-attachment, perhaps just the remedy needed for intellectuals prone to grasping at theories. Nāgārjuna's philosophy is, in other words, a quietist Buddhist practice that does not rely on the ultimate acceptance of any beliefs.

A quietist, skeptical Mādhyamika might even participate in Buddhist religious rituals without affirming any real beliefs about merit, karma, and the like. This attitude would be much like that of Sextus Empiricus, who says that Pyrrhonian skeptics can engage in religious rituals and be pious toward the gods without having any religious beliefs.¹⁰⁰ Many religious people would find it odd, if not offensive, to engage in a religious practice without really *believing* in the tenets that religion, but as Harald Thorsrud suggests, for Pyrrhonian skeptics “piety is ... reduced to certain kinds of conventional behaviour along with the relevant dispositions. Belief or lack of belief is no longer essential” (Thorsrud 2009, 190).

Skepticism about religion is generally seen by religious philosophers as a threat; if we are unable to know anything about topics such as whether God exists or whether there's an afterlife, religion is thought to be imperiled. I find it fascinating that, rather than argue against skepticism about religion, Nāgārjuna might say that a good Buddhist

¹⁰⁰ For instance, at PH 3.3. For a short but illuminating discussion of the Pyrrhonist attitude toward religious practice, see Thorsrud 2009, 188-190.

could embrace skepticism insofar as it can destroy dogmatic attachment. Contemporary philosophers such as William Alston have maintained that externalist, reliabilist accounts of knowledge answer religious skepticism by showing that theology could be an autonomous, reliable belief-forming mechanism that gives us genuine knowledge of God (Alston 1992). Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, does not need to engage in such philosophical enterprises for the simple reason that his philosophical and religious practice does not rest on knowledge-claims or beliefs, but rather the elimination of the sorts of beliefs that provide the foundation for most religions, including most forms of Buddhism.

Nāgārjuna's religiosity without belief may not work for other religions, especially those tied more explicitly to acceptance of a creed, but it could work for Buddhism, at least of a skeptical, quietist variety. Unlike fideists such as Montaigne¹⁰¹, Nāgārjuna does not go about "... annihilating his intellect to make room for faith" (Montaigne 1987, 74), he engages in philosophical destruction to bring about mental quietude, which is the absence of any faith or belief.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Whether Montaigne is a fideist remains a matter of interpretive dispute, but I think it makes sense of the *Apology*. See Hartle 2005 and M. A. Screech's introduction in Montaigne 1987.

¹⁰² Some readers might suspect that Nāgārjuna's attitude about religious belief could be favorably compared to nonrealist or Wittgensteinian approaches in philosophy of religion. Nonrealism in philosophy of religion means that religious beliefs do not refer to non-observable phenomena (God, *karma*, etc.), but instead are expressions of attitudes or part of rituals. D. Z. Phillips, a prominent representative of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, claims that careful attention to the grammar of religious beliefs rules out both realism and nonrealism – realism because it neglects the larger context and effects of religious beliefs and nonrealism because it neglects that part of the context of religious beliefs include that such beliefs are *about* something (D. Phillips 1993, Ch. 4 – see also Mulhall 2001 for an overview of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion). While comparisons between these approaches and my interpretation of Nāgārjuna are worth pursuing in more detail, I would note that nonrealist and Wittgensteinian approaches concern the meaning of religious beliefs, such that they attempt to make sense of what's going on when people sincerely hold and express religious beliefs. My skeptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, denies that Nāgārjunian skeptics would sincerely hold such beliefs, although they might utter phrases that sound like expressions of religious belief as part of a quietist practice. Wittgensteinians would presumably critique the idea that I can so easily split holding a belief from its practical context whereas nonrealists would deny that religious beliefs require affirmations of truth-claims,

3.8 Historical precedents for skeptical interpretations

I prefer to think of Buddhist philosophers in the same way as I think of other philosophers, namely, as authors whose texts we can grapple with independently. Contemporary scholars of Buddhist philosophy sometimes seem overly concerned with verifying their interpretations in the commentarial tradition. It seems to me that seventh-century Indian monks were not necessarily any more immune to hermeneutic error than we are, although I admit that in many cases they had a far more direct line of communication with the original author. I don't mean to impugn the tradition, and I certainly don't mean to deny that some understanding of the tradition is often a helpful guide. My point is simply that agreement with some historical commentator is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a good *philosophical* interpretation of a Buddhist text. Nonetheless, the fact that there are some precedents for skeptical interpretations is *historically* interesting in that it demonstrates some continuity with Buddhist traditions. Contemporary skeptical interpreters such as myself may be wrong, but we are not alone.

My first example is Candrakīrti (one of those seventh-century Indian monks). I've already given some reasons to interpret Candrakīrti skeptically in sections 3.4 and 3.6¹⁰³, so here I'll just remind readers of his commentary on verse 25.24 of Nāgārjuna's MMK¹⁰⁴: "that which is the pacification, or cessation, of all bases of conceptual

but I think Nāgārjuna's point is that beliefs of a philosophical or religious nature often involve harmful psychological attachments that can't be eliminated simply by another definition of what it means to hold a belief – the tendency toward belief itself should be eliminated.

¹⁰³ For a more in-depth treatment of Candrakīrti's skepticism, see Dreyfus and Garfield 2011, 124-130. While I ultimately disagree with their interpretation of Candrakīrti as a "Constructive Pyrrhonian" (126) because it seems to me that even Candrakīrti's "constructive" tendencies are purely therapeutic, Dreyfus and Garfield make some worthwhile points about Candrakīrti, Academic Skepticism, and Pyrrhonism.

¹⁰⁴ There are also his arguments against Dignāga's epistemology and disagreement with Bhāviveka on whether Dignāga's form of reasoning is appropriate for Mādhyamikas (for instance, PP 20; see also

proliferation, that is *nirvāṇa*. ... Also, pacification of conceptual proliferation, because there is non-activity of words, is peace, because of the non-functioning of thought” (PP, p. 236).¹⁰⁵ This passage is an obvious example of what I am calling phase two, because it concerns the “pacification of conceptual proliferation” (*prapañcōpaśama*), which is the freedom from philosophical speculation.

When Madhyamaka was transmitted to China by Kumārajīva in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, he may have brought with him a skeptical understanding of Nāgārjuna. According to Richard Robinson, Kumārajīva “rejected all notions of existent and nonexistent, while maintaining that the negation of these notions was simply a therapeutic device” (Robinson 1967, 95). His student, Sengzhao, says that “... the Holy Mind is void and still” and that “*Prajñā* is devoid of the marks of arising and ceasing, devoid of all marks of existing things. It has no thing that is known and no thing that it sees” (Robinson 1967, 126, 124).¹⁰⁶ Kevin Sullivan calls the attitude of Kumārajīva “religious pragmatism,” because the role of emptiness is purely soteriological rather than descriptive (Sullivan 1988, 98-100). Although Kumārajīva and Sengzhao may ultimately be mystics rather than skeptics, there is at least some affinity with my skeptical interpretation in their use of philosophical negation to cultivate stillness of mind.

Perhaps the clearest historical precedents for skeptical interpretations are found in the Tibetan tradition. The *Great Digest* of the fifteenth-century philosopher Khedrupje contains a section refuting an opponent who claims, “The Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas have

Bhāviveka’s arguments in Ames 1993). I see the purpose of these arguments as a refusal of any serious attempt at epistemology, rather than any endorsement of an anti-realist, contextualist epistemology.

¹⁰⁵ ... *sarveśāṃ prapañcānāṃ nimittānāṃ ya upaśamo ‘pravṛttis tān nirvāṇam. ... vācāṃ apravṛtter vā prapañcōpaśamaś cittasya apravṛtteḥ śivaḥ*. PP, p. 236.

¹⁰⁶ These are Robinson’s translations, or as he calls them “restatements”: “... I furnish a periphrastic restatement in order to elucidate certain modes of meaning” (Robinson 1967, 101).

no system of their own, no belief, and nothing at all that they accept” (Cabezón 1992, 257). The opponent here is a radical skeptic, or perhaps a mystic, and Khedrupjey does a thorough, Geluk job of attempting to demolish this interpretation (Cabezón 1992, 256-272). It should be noted that Khedrupjey here demonstrates a concern about metaphilosophical skepticism although he himself is not a skeptic.

The clearest skeptical precedent of them all, however, is the twelfth-century Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka philosopher Patsab Nyimadrak. Patsab, according to Dreyfus, has the following attitude:

Mādhyamikas do not have any thesis to establish, view to defend, or position to eliminate about how things really are. They merely proceed by consequences exposing the contradictions to which the views of their adversaries lead. Mādhyamikas are not in the game of demonstrating the truth or falsity of claims about how things are. (Dreyfus 2011, 99)

Like Sextus, Patsab sees his philosophical practice as therapy for those under the sway of dogmatic views and aims for a tranquil mental state. As a Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika, however, Patsab’s method is not the Pyrrhonian method of demonstrating that two opposing theses are equal in their convincingness and unconvincingness. Rather, he uses the Prasaṅga method, which Tibetan philosophers identified with Candrakīrti in opposition to Bhāviveka’s Svātantra method, in which Mādhyamikas demonstrate the incoherencies, and hence unconvincingness, of *all* views on a subject.

Patsab also rules out any place for *pramāṇas* in Madhyamaka, even in the sense that some readers find in Candrakīrti. He also interprets such seemingly-positive Madhyamaka notions as the two truths as therapeutic devices to be used in a skeptical practice of undermining views (Dreyfus 2011, 104). Unlike a mystic, he refuses to accept that emptiness itself can be an object of inference or perception, even of the

“yogic” variety, because to do any of those things would be to make emptiness into an object, and this alleged “object” always disappears under analysis (Dreyfus 2011, 98-99, 104-105). To use my language of the two phases of Madhyamaka philosophy, Patsab is pointing out that all the Madhyamaka tropes of phase one – the two truths, dependent origination, even emptiness itself – lead in the final analysis to what Nāgārjuna claimed is the goal of Madhyamaka all along – “the abandoning of all views” (MMK 27.30). Patsab describes this as a state of “wisdom.” However, as Dreyfus points out, “This wisdom is not a cognitively active state engaged in figuring particular objects but, rather, is the cessation of any attempt to cognize reality” (Dreyfus 2011, 105). It is having as his goal this complete cessation of any attempt to know or apprehend reality that makes Patsab a genuine skeptic of the metaphilosophical variety as opposed to a mystic or anti-realist.

This historical interlude shows that a skeptical reading of Nāgārjuna may be unpopular, but it is not without some basis in Buddhist traditions. It has been an uncommon reading because, of the two main tendencies in the history of Buddhist philosophy, the analysis-insight tendency has been stronger than the skeptical, quietist tendency. Nonetheless, the skeptical, quietist tendency is a legitimate interpretation of Buddhist philosophy with a long historical pedigree.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have defended my interpretation of Nāgārjuna as a metaphilosophical skeptic. I described some of the leading contemporary interpretations (mystical, anti-realist, transcendental, and skeptical) and developed my own version of

skeptical interpretation in which Nāgārjuna's philosophical activity takes place in two phases: phase one, in which he seeks to support a thesis of universal emptiness and criticize alternative views, and phase two, in which he demonstrates that the thesis of emptiness undermines itself along with all competing philosophical theories, leaving a thorough Mādhyamika in a state of the pacification of conceptual proliferation with no view, thesis, or theory at all. I then demonstrated how this interpretation can make sense of Madhyamaka critiques of causation and epistemology and answered objections that my interpretation makes Nāgārjuna insufficiently Buddhist. I discussed a few Buddhist philosophers (such as Candrakīrti, Kumārajīva, and Patsab) who developed interpretations of Nāgārjuna similar to mine, which in itself doesn't give a sufficient reason to accept my interpretation – they could all be wrong, but at least I am in interesting company. Nāgārjuna's skepticism, along with non-skeptical responses to his works, shows that metaphilosophical skepticism was a concern in classical Indian thought.

Nonetheless, some contemporary philosophers may feel that my interpretation has the unforgivable defect of not being philosophically interesting, since the way I paint him Nāgārjuna turns out to be uninterested in constructive philosophy. I would point out that the label “philosophically interesting” is applied largely in line with one's personal intellectual taste. Besides, being interesting hasn't really been my goal; rather I have tried to see what happens when we take Nāgārjuna at his word, even when – and perhaps *especially* when – it looks like he's contradicting himself. While a skeptical Nāgārjuna may not be interesting to many contemporary philosophers who are quite comfortable with their residence in phase one, I find it fascinating that a mind as philosophically

astute as Nāgārjuna's would turn itself to the philosophical purging of philosophical impulses and that this could be done in line with Buddhist motivations. Nāgārjuna's version of metaphilosophical skepticism is quite interesting (to me, anyway) and it gives us an example of skepticism in classical Indian philosophy, but he was not the only philosopher in classical India who embodied metaphilosophical skepticism. In the next chapter, I'll investigate Jayarāśi, whose motivations for pursuing metaphilosophical skepticism grew not out of Buddhism, but out of the irreligious Cārvāka school.

Chapter Four

Cārvāka Skepticism: Jayarāśi's Delightful Destruction of Epistemology¹

“When, in this way, the principles are entirely destroyed, all everyday practices are made delightful, because they are not deliberated.” – Jayarāśi, TUS 14.5

In the previous chapter, I argued that some Mādhyamikas, in particular Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, are best interpreted as metaphilosophical skeptics. Instead of using philosophical arguments to deny knowledge of the external world or mind independent reality, Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti use their philosophical arguments to uproot the impulse to philosophize, purging a thorough Mādhyamika of any philosophical views to which a Buddhist might become attached. In this chapter my aim is to show that Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa (c. 770-830 CE²) is also best interpreted as a metaphilosophical skeptic, albeit one of a different character. Jayarāśi's metaphilosophical skepticism differs from Madhyamaka metaphilosophical skepticism in several ways. First, it is more direct in that it does not come in two phases. Second, it is not intended to be compatible with Buddhism or any other religious practice. Third, it allows us to see how Jayarāśi's skepticism serves his Cārvāka sympathies. Jayarāśi's skepticism, along with non-

¹ A modified version of this chapter is forthcoming in *Philosophy East and West*, 65:4 (October 2015). This chapter has benefited from the comments of the two anonymous reviewers at *Philosophy East and West* in addition to detailed comments by John Taber, Stephen Harris, and Don Levi.

² Jayarāśi's dates, like the dates of most classical Indian philosophers, are very difficult to determine with any certainty. The date given is from Franco 1994, xi. For more details on attempts to date Jayarāśi, see Sanghavi and Parikh 1987, iv-xi, Franco 1994, 9-15, and Balcerowicz 2011. Balcerowicz puts the TUS somewhere between 800 and 840 CE.

skeptical responses to it, gives more evidence for my claim that metaphilosophical skepticism was a concern among classical Indian philosophers.

My plan for this chapter is to begin with an apology for Cārvāka studies to show that, despite being of little interest to many contemporary scholars, the study of Cārvāka in general and Jayarāśi in particular can contribute toward a richer understanding of the diversity of Indian thought and offer fertile grounds for comparative studies. Then I will turn to Jayarāśi's *Tattvopaplavasīṃha* (*Lion of the Destruction of Principles*) to show its main purpose: the denial of what contemporary epistemologist Michael Williams calls "epistemological realism." Toward this end, I will make a case study of Jayarāśi's arguments against the epistemological theories of Dignāga (c. 480-540 CE) and Dharmakīrti (c. 600-660 CE). And what is the point of Jayarāśi's destruction of epistemology? This is where I find it helpful to compare Jayarāśi's outlook to contextualism in contemporary epistemology: in the context of epistemology, epistemology self-destructs; in the context of everyday life, there is no need for epistemology. Lastly, I consider how, by connecting the rejection of epistemological realism with a form of contextualism, Jayarāśi's text can be viewed in light of his Cārvāka sympathies. Ultimately, the delightful destruction of epistemology clears the ground for a form of life free from the burdens of philosophy and religion.

4.1 An apology for Cārvāka studies

It is perhaps not much of an exaggeration to say that the two least popular kinds of views in Indian philosophy are those of the anti-religious Cārvāka school and those tending toward radical skepticism. The Cārvākas are often considered a philosophical

aberration and, as noted in chapter two, some scholars have discounted the importance of philosophical skepticism in classical Indian philosophy. It should not be a surprise then, that Jayarāśi, who is in my opinion both a Cārvāka and a skeptic, is often overlooked in contemporary studies of Indian philosophy. In chapter two, I discussed the question of whether a concern about philosophical skepticism can be found in classical Indian philosophy. My answer was that there are in fact classical Indian skeptics and that Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi are two of the clearest examples, both of who elicited responses from their non-skeptical counterparts. My hope in this chapter is to rectify Jayarāśi's situation in particular and to suggest that scholars of Indian philosophy ought to be more open to the study of Cārvāka as well.

An obvious difficulty in the study of the Cārvāka school is an almost complete lack of primary texts. Cārvāka views are described in texts of other schools, but there are no genuine texts available, with the sole exception of Jayarāśi's *Tattvopaplavasimha* (hereafter, TUS).³ There are references to Cārvākas or others with similar views scattered throughout a variety of texts including the Vedas and the Pāli Canon⁴; Ramkrishna Bhattacharya (2002) has presented perhaps the most thorough collection of these fragments to date. However, the most often cited representation of Cārvāka views continues to be Mādhava's *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* (*Collection of All Philosophical Systems*). In this text, Cārvāka opinions are set forth as follows. In metaphysics, Cārvākas are worldly (hence, their alternate name, Lokāyata, which means "prevalent in the world" or "disseminated among the people") and materialist, denying the existence of

³ There is controversy about whether this text is an authentically Cārvāka text, but I take the side that it is. Both the controversy and my opinion about it will be detailed below.

⁴ For example, *Rg Veda*, 8.89 and the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 1.34). See also Kṛṣṇamiśra's allegorical play, *Prabodhacandrodaya*, which contains a character named Cārvāka.

a non-material soul, karma, and rebirth. In epistemology, Cārvākas are represented as holding that perception is the only *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge), as well as offering a technically sophisticated critique of inference.⁵ In ethics, Cārvākas are fiercely anti-religious, holding a hedonistic view that pleasure is the ultimate end of life, and they claim that their view should be accepted out of kindness to living beings.

Radhakrishnan and Moore's influential *Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* contains clear examples of what I call the "Cārvāka as Exception" view. In the General Introduction, Indian philosophy is deemed to be chiefly "spiritual." The very phrase "except the Cārvāka" then appears no less than four times in the following nine pages (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1989, xxiii-xxx). The "Cārvāka as Exception" view continues to be fairly standard over 50 years later. Cārvākas are usually presented in sharp contrast against the background of *mokṣa*-seeking or soteriological presuppositions of Indian philosophers. The prevailing opinion seems to be that since the Cārvākas were such an exception to the "essence" of Indian philosophy that they are not of much

⁵ The main critique of inference is that there is no way to establish the pervasion (*vyāpti*) of the proof (*sādhana*) and that which is to be proved (*sādhya*). It cannot be perceived, since one cannot perceive the future and the past. It cannot be inferred or known by testimony (*śabda*), since either of those options would constitute an infinite regress (*anavasthā*). Furthermore, the notion of a special cause or extraneous condition (*upādhi*) creates a problem. A stock example of an *upādhi* is wet fuel as a cause of smoke rather than merely fire. It is not just fire that causes smoke, since fire using dry fuel or fire in a red-hot iron ball do not produce smoke. The presence of this *upādhi* (wet fuel) is what accounts for the invalidity of the inference, "there is smoke on the mountain, because there is fire on the mountain." A true pervasion (*vyāpti*) must consist of a necessary connection (*avinābhāva*), which means one must rule out any *upādhis*. (See Gangopadhyay 1971 for a detailed treatment of *upādhi* in Nyāya). According to the Cārvāka position in SDS, one cannot know that there is a necessary connection, because one would have to know the absence of *upādhis*. Knowing the absence of *upādhis* is problematic, since cognizing an *upādhi* would require cognizing the *vyāpti* and cognizing the *vyāpti* would require cognizing the *upādhi*. Hence, there is the fallacy of mutual dependence (*parasparāśraya*) and a successful inference can never be proved. Lastly, there is an account of successful activity without inference: "Activity with regard to a cognition of fire and so forth immediately following a cognition of "smoky" (*dhūmra*), etc., is made possible (*yujyate*) by error or by being based on perception" (*dhūmrādiḥjñānānantaram agnyādiḥjñāne pravṛttiḥ pratyakṣamūlatayā bhrāntyā vā yujyate*. SDS, p. 4). For the full critique of inference, see SDS, p. 3-4. See Phillips 2012, 56 for discussion of the Nyāya response to this line of argument.

interest.⁶ I would not deny that the Cārvākas were in most ways exceptions to the rule of their fellow philosophers; however, rather than an excuse to ignore or quickly dismiss them, I argue that this makes them all the more interesting. We may find that the Cārvākas were more diverse, sophisticated, and unique than anyone has suspected. We may even find philosophically fruitful invitations to comparative studies. But we will never know as long as the “Cārvāka as Exception” view discourages us from looking.

Though sparse, there has been some recent interest in Cārvāka. Chattopadhyaya’s *Lokāyata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* presents Cārvāka as a precursor to Marxist dialectical materialism; one point of inspiration is the ambiguity of the word “Lokāyata,” which can mean “prevalent among the people” as well as “worldly” (Chattopadhyaya 1973, 1-4). While Chattopadhyaya’s work has its merits as a creative and provocative intellectual history, its speculative and overtly political nature have caused it be discounted by most scholars.⁷

Jayatileke’s *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* contains a valuable chapter on ancient Indian materialism and makes a distinction between three kinds of Cārvāka views: those who accept only perception, those who accept perception and a form of inference limited to perceivable objects, and lastly those who reject all *pramāṇas* (Jayatileke 1963, 71-2). The first group consists of the Cārvākas of the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, the second is represented by Purandara, and the third by Jayarāśi. Purandara’s “more educated” (*suśikṣitatara*) strain of Cārvāka is discussed by

⁶ Perhaps another reason that contemporary scholars eschew the study of Cārvāka is that contemporary Westerners look to Indian philosophy for something “different”; it may be that the materialist, atheist Cārvākas look – at first glance – a little too much like many of us.

⁷ Eli Franco somewhat uncharitably describes Chattopadhyaya’s work as a “fascinating Marxist science fiction saga” (Franco 1994, xii). Richard King, however, favorably cites Chattopadhyaya several times (King 1999, 19, 20, 133). Chattopadhyaya has also edited a comprehensive anthology of primary and secondary sources on Cārvāka (Chattopadhyaya 1990).

Jayanta in the *Nyāyamañjarī*. Pradeep Gokhale offers a valuable reconstruction of Purandara’s view that answers objections leveled at the perception-only view and avoids accepting trans-empirical uses of inference (Gokhale 1993).

Richard King’s *Indian Philosophy* contains a section entitled “Indian Materialism – A Counter-Example” (King 1999, 16-23). Although King believes Cārvāka is unlikely to become a major interest due to pervasive materialism in the West and the Western preconception of Indian philosophy as spiritual, he admonishes readers to remain intellectually honest in recognizing the diversity of Indian philosophy (King 1999, 22). Daya Krishna uses Cārvāka in his forceful polemic against the essential spirituality of Indian philosophy (Krishna 1997, 4). While diving into the controversy concerning the “essence” of Indian philosophy would take me far afield, I can assert uncontroversially that the study of Cārvāka can reveal a rich diversity within Indian philosophy. More controversially I also suggest that a more in-depth understanding of Cārvāka might incite us to revisit the question of the extent to which Indian philosophy is soteriological or spiritual and the extent to which such categories make sense in a classical Indian context.

Jayarāśi’s *Tattvopaplavasimha* (TUS), which is the only candidate we currently have for an authentic Cārvāka text, seems to have been known by classical Indian philosophers, which again gives reason to think that his skepticism raised an issue with which other philosophers were concerned. Śrī Harṣa, for instance, refers to Cārvākas that do not accept any *pramāṇas*, which is probably a reference to Jayarāśi or other skeptical Cārvākas. In the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* he denies that entering into a philosophical debate entails that both parties accept the existence of *pramāṇas* “because one understands the extensive discourses of Cārvākas, Mādhyamikas, and so forth even

though they do not accept that (i.e., that the *pramāṇas* exist)” (KhKh, p. 7).⁸ The Jain philosophers Anantavīrya, Vidyānanda, and Malliṣena Sūri all refer to Jayarāśi more directly: Anantavīrya refers to Jayarāśi by name, Vidyānanda refers to a *tattvopaplavavādin*, and Malliṣena Sūri refers to the TUS by name.⁹ The Naiyāyika Bhāsarvajña discusses many of Jayarāśi’s arguments in detail in an attempt to refute them.¹⁰

Despite the fact that a manuscript of the TUS was rediscovered in 1926 and an edition published in 1940, there has been relatively little scholarly interest in the text (Sanghavi and Parikh 1987, “Preface”; Franco 1994, xi). Interestingly, a translation of one chapter of the TUS appears in Radhakrishnan and Moore’s *Sourcebook* and Jayarāśi has been mentioned in other influential studies of Indian philosophy (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 236-246, Potter 1977, 50). However, it remains the case that Jayarāśi is sometimes discussed briefly, but scholars rarely give him in depth treatment,¹¹ although Eli Franco’s several excellent studies (1983; 1984; 1994) and a few treatments by Dilipkumar Mohanta (1989; 1990; 2009) are notable exceptions to this trend.

For many interpreters one of Jayarāśi’s immediate challenges comes in the question of his doctrinal affiliation. Was Jayarāśi a Cārvāka? If the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* were to give the criteria of Cārvāka membership, Jayarāśi would fail the test. Jayarāśi not only denies all *pramāṇas*, but he even denies that the materialist principles of Bṛhaspati, the putative founder of Cārvāka, can be ultimately established.

⁸ *tadanabhyupagacchato ‘pi cārvākamādhyamikāder vāgvistarāṇām pratyamānatvāt.* KhKh, p. 7.

⁹ References to Jayarāśi by Jain philosophers and others are discussed in Sanghavi and Parikh 1987, iii-xi.

¹⁰ Franco discusses Bhāsarvajña’s treatment of Jayarāśi in great detail in an appendix entitled “Bhāsarvajña and Jayarāśi: The Refutation of Scepticism in the *Nyāyabhūṣana*” (Franco 1994, 553-586).

¹¹ For examples of mentions of Jayarāśi, see King 1999, 19 and Ganeri 2001, 27-8. Phillips discusses Jayarāśi in some detail *vis-à-vis* Jayarāśi’s influence on Śrī Harṣa (Phillips 1995, 71-74).

Thus, it seems that Jayarāṣi accepts neither the epistemology nor the metaphysics of the Cārvāka school and must be denied membership, despite his professed adherence to the intentions of Bṛhaspati. This is the most common argument against Jayarāṣi being a Cārvāka.¹²

Sanghavi and Parikh offer a response to this argument. According to them Jayarāṣi is a member of a “particular division” of the Cārvāka school for the reason that Bṛhaspati is the only philosopher that he quotes favorably. They offer an explanation for his apparent repudiation of Bṛhaspati’s materialism: “Jayarāṣi thus disposes of the orthodoxy and starts, so to say, with the permission of his Guru, by removing him out of the way, on his campaign of demolishing the doctrines of other schools” (Sanghavi and Parikh 1987, xii). In other words, Jayarāṣi takes up the negative wing of Cārvāka argumentation with such force that he must demolish even the positive program of other Cārvākas in order to complete his task – in effect, he “out-Bṛhaspatis” Bṛhaspati.

Jayatilleke also views Jayarāṣi as a representative of one branch of Cārvāka. He rejects A. K. Warder’s suggestion that Jayarāṣi is a positivist to put forward the claim that he is “an absolute nihilist in his metaphysics though he may be called a logical sceptic in so far as he is sceptical of (i.e., doubts or denies) the possibility of knowledge”

(Jayatilleke 1963, 82). According to Jayatilleke, while Jayarāṣi’s arguments are mostly

¹² Chattopadhyaya, for instance, denies that Jayarāṣi is a Cārvāka on precisely these grounds, claiming that the work is mere extreme skepticism (Chattopadhyaya 1990, 491) and at another point that it may be an idealist work (Franco 1994, xii). Ramkrishna Bhattacharya makes another attempt, quite strained in my opinion, to give evidence that Jayarāṣi was not a Cārvāka in that he refers to Bṛhaspati as “Lord” (*bhagavān*) and as “preceptor of the gods” (*suraguru*) (TUS, p. 45, p. 125, Bhattacharya 2002, 629 n. 43). Here I think Jayarāṣi could simply be facetious or satirical as he often is elsewhere. Also, the “*bhagavān*” could simply be a term of respect and is directly followed by a quote denying the existence of another world (*paraloka*). “*Suraguru*” is an epithet for Bṛhaspati (Monier-Williams 1994, 1234); using this name need not imply the existence of the divine any more than using the name “Devadatta.” For more discussion of arguments claiming that Jayarāṣi cannot be a Cārvāka, see Franco 1994, xi-xiii and Werner 1995 (the latter is a critical review of Franco 1994).

epistemological, chapter eight of the TUS, which is on the soul, shows that Jayarāśi also has a nihilist metaphysical agenda. However, Jayatilleke sees Jayarāśi as a “pragmatic materialist,” since he recommends materialism on quotidian, not metaphysical, grounds (Jayatilleke 1963, 82-91).

Richard King suggests that, “we should consider the possibility that Jayarāśi was in actual fact a sceptic with Lokāyata sympathies” (King 1999, 19). The question here is whether Jayarāśi was a skeptic first and Cārvāka second or vice versa, a question Stephen Phillips also considers (Phillips 1994, 71-73). Although I’m not convinced that it is always worthwhile to pigeon-hole classical Indian philosophers into one particular school¹³, at the very least we should admit that Jayarāśi represents a skeptical sub-school of Cārvāka, which is distinct from those schools that admit as *pramāṇas* perception or a limited form of inference.

There are two main reasons to see Jayarāśi as a representative of a skeptical sub-school of Cārvāka. First, as mentioned above some classical Indian philosophers such as Śrī Harṣa refer to a skeptical branch of Cārvākas (KhKh, p. 7), which gives some evidence for Jayatilleke’s suggestion that Jayarāśi represents a skeptical sub-school.

Second, other schools, such as Buddhism, Mīmāṃsā, or Vedānta, exhibit internal diversity; there is no reason to conclude that Cārvāka could not exhibit similar diversity.

It would be a mistake to deny that Madhyamaka is really a Buddhist school because

¹³ It may be best to take Daya Krishna’s advice to question the whole game of doctrinal affiliation and take the schools of Indian philosophy as “styles of thought which are developed by successive thinkers, and not fully exemplified by any” (Krishna 1997, 13). On Krishna’s view, Indian schools should be seen as “schools” of Western philosophy such as empiricism or idealism. Just as Berkeley is both an empiricist and an idealist, why can we not see Jayarāśi as both a Cārvāka and a skeptic? Another reason for my doubts about the philosophical importance of doctrinal affiliation is that it can often obscure the unique contributions of a philosopher. Instead of obsessing about how Jayarāśi fits into some pre-established concept of what it means to be a Cārvāka, we ought to read his text on his own merits as I think any work of philosophy deserves.

Mādhymikas do not accept any *pramāṇas* just as it would be a mistake to deny that Prabhākāra and Bhaṭṭa Mīmāṃsā are both Mīmāṃsā schools despite their differences in epistemology, or to deny that Advaita, Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, etc. can all be Vedānta due to their extensive metaphysical differences. Likewise, it would be a mistake to view Cārvāka as a monolithic philosophical bloc incapable of internal diversity. As Bhattacharya notes (2010), there is evidence of at least four commentators on Br̥haspati’s lost *Cārvākasūtra*: Kambalāśvatara, Purandara, Aviddhakarṇa, and Udbhaṭa. These commentators did not agree on everything – Udbhaṭa, in fact, may have even been a metaphysical dualist! Despite the evidence he gives of this internal diversity, Bhattacharya nonetheless assumes that there must have been one “*original* Cārvāka position,” which he takes to be closer to the view of Purandara that admits of inference insofar as it can be confirmed by experience (Bhattacharya 2010, 423). Bhattacharya suggests that later commentators either supported this original position, as did Purandara, or strayed from it, as did Udbhaṭa.

I’m not so sure that, even if there were one original Cārvāka position, there would be enough evidence to say much about the details of that position. We have only fragments of Br̥haspati’s original text, and the earliest evidence suggests that there were a variety of materialist, skeptical, and anti-religious philosophers who constituted the historical background of later Cārvāka developments. For instance, the *Samaññaphala Sutta* (DN 2) relates the stories of several possible proto-Cārvākas: Purana Kassapa denies karmic retribution or reward for one’s actions, Ajita Kesakambalin offers a materialist view in which the person is annihilated at death, and Sañjaya Belatthaputta refuses to put forward a view in a strikingly skeptical fashion. While it is possible that

Cārvāka developed from one source at the expense of others, I think that the evidence – scanty though it may be – suggests that the traditions that later came to be labeled as Cārvāka were quite diverse from the beginning and that Cārvāka retained this internal diversity as it developed.

While none of this provides strict proof that Jayarāśi was a genuine Cārvāka, my hope is simply to show that there are reasons to think Jayarāśi may have represented one of several diverse strands of Cārvāka. Near the end of the chapter I will give more reasons to include Jayarāśi in the Cārvāka camp. For now I will suggest that, given the evidence of internal diversity of metaphysical and epistemological views, one plausible criterion for Cārvāka membership is that the philosophers in question see their work as part of the pursuit of an irreligious way of life, which in the classical Indian context would consist in a rejection of the authority of the Vedas or of religious teachers such as the Buddha and Mahāvīra. This criterion gives less weight to following the letter of Bṛhaspati and more to following the spirit of his irreligiousness. My more inclusive criterion can accommodate a dualist like Udbhaṭa, the Cārvākas of the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, and Purandara's limited endorsement of inference. As I will show, Jayarāśi satisfies this criterion in a unique and fascinating way.

To sum up, there is evidence to suggest that Jayarāśi belonged to a skeptical branch of Cārvākas, but he also gives us good reason to rethink some of the ways we carve up the philosophical landscape of classical India. On my view Jayarāśi really is a Cārvāka, but the Cārvāka family is big enough to include a skeptic.

4.2 Jayarāṣi's denial of epistemological realism

As I suggested in chapter two, section 2.8, Jayarāṣi should be thought of as a metaphilosophical skeptic, much like Sextus and, as I argued in the previous chapter, Nāgārjuna. One difference between Sextus and Jayarāṣi is that Sextus criticizes almost everything his Stoic opponents would think of as philosophy, while Jayarāṣi is more narrowly focused on epistemology (*pramāṇavāda*). This shouldn't be surprising, since Indian philosophy generally took an epistemological turn after or slightly before the time of Dignāga. I'll say more in sections 4.6 and 4.7 about why I think Jayarāṣi concerns himself with epistemology, but for now I simply mean to point out that Sextus and Jayarāṣi are both skeptics about epistemology, by which I mean that they are skeptics about what their contemporaries thought of as systematic discourse about knowledge. In the previous chapter, I also argued that Nāgārjuna could be read as a skeptic about epistemology and about other areas of philosophy as well, especially metaphysics.

But what exactly are these skeptics skeptical *about*? What do they mean by "epistemology"? Sextus's critique of epistemology centers on the division of philosophy the Stoics called logic. Nāgārjuna's main target in the VV is the discourse on *pramāṇa* (means of knowledge) as conceived by his Nyāya interlocutor; Nāgārjuna's commentator Candrakīrti is just as skeptical about Dignāga's Buddhist epistemology (PP, p. 20-25). In the TUS Jayarāṣi also critiques Nyāya epistemology (chapters one and seven) and Buddhist epistemology (chapters four, five and nine). Additionally Jayarāṣi critiques almost every epistemological theory of his day, with chapters on Mīmāṃsā (chapters two, five, and ten) and Sāṃkhya (chapter six) as well as chapters on specific means of knowledge such as testimony (*śabda* – chapter fourteen) and comparison (*upamāna* –

chapter eleven). Since the historical scope of Jayarāṣī's critique is so wide, it's more difficult to define the target of his critique in historical terms, although I don't think this should dissuade us from trying to identify historical targets of specific arguments, as Franco (1994) has done so thoroughly. I think it makes more sense to ask what it is that these diverse schools have in common. In the remainder of this section, I'll try to be more precise about the specific philosophical core that serves as the underlying target of Jayarāṣī's critique of *pramāṇavāda* (epistemology).

Jayarāṣī's version of metaphilosophical skepticism is more straightforward than Nāgārjuna's. It may be that, as a Cārvāka, he was unencumbered with the task of showing that his skepticism fits with particular religious doctrines; in fact, he doesn't even claim to ultimately accept *Cārvāka* doctrines! Concerning the common Cārvāka materialist view that everything is constituted from the four material elements of Earth, Air, Water, and Fire, Jayarāṣī says, "The principles of Earth, etc. are extremely well-established in the world. Even these, upon being examined, are not established. How much less the others?" (TUS 0.2).¹⁴ Jayarāṣī's arguments are almost exclusively directed toward epistemology. In the introduction to the *Tattvopaplavasīṃha* (TUS), Jayarāṣī lays out an argument that sets up the template for the remainder of the text.

The establishment of the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) is based on a true definition. And the establishment of the objects of knowledge (*prameyas*) is based on the means of knowledge. When that [true definition] does not exist, then how could those two (i.e., the means and

¹⁴ *prthivyādīni tattvāni loke prasiddhāni. tāny api vicāryamāṇāni na vyavatiṣṭhante. kiṃ punar anyāni?* TUS 0.2. Note: The numbers given for citations of the TUS correspond to Franco's numbering system for the Sanskrit text based on subjects discussed (Franco 1994, 55). Where page numbers are given, I am citing the page numbers from the 1987 Sanghavi and Parikh edition. There is a 2010 edition of the TUS edited by Shuchita Mehta and translated by Esther Solomon, which I have specifically cited as needed.

the object of knowledge) be the subject of everyday practice toward existing things? (TUS 0.3)¹⁵

This argument can be made more precise by construing the premises as biconditional statements and rephrasing the last sentence from a rhetorical question into a conclusion:

One can establish the *pramāṇas* if and only if one can establish a definition of the *pramāṇas*. One can establish the *prameyas* if and only if one can establish the *pramāṇas*. Therefore, if one cannot establish a definition, then one cannot establish either the *pramāṇas* or the *prameyas*.¹⁶

This argument is valid and the goal of the TUS is to establish that it is sound by showing that the antecedent of the conclusion is true (i.e., that the definitions of *pramāṇas* cannot be established), which would then show that neither the *pramāṇas* nor the *prameyas* can be established.¹⁷ In this way, Jayarāśi attempts to show the futility of epistemology itself.

But why would Jayarāśi think that there's a connection between an inability to define epistemological concepts and the possibility of epistemology? Jayarāśi doesn't say much in response to this question, but I can suggest two possible answers. First, he might build off of his rhetorical question, "When that [true definition] does not exist, then

¹⁵ *sallakṣaṇanibandhanam mānavyavasthānam. mānanibandhanā ca meyasthitih. tadabhāve tayoh sadvyavahāraviśayatvaṃ katham ... TUS 0.3.*

¹⁶ Enthusiasts of logic might want this symbolized. Let N= establish *pramāṇas*, Y= establish *prameyas*, and D= establish definition. P1: N↔D. P2: Y↔N. C: ~D→ ~(N ∨ Y). I'm not entirely sure that my conclusion fits the Sanskrit "*sadvyavahāraviśayatvaṃ*." I suspect that "being the subject of everyday practice toward existing things," "being talked about as real" (Franco 1994, 69-71), or being "taken as object of correct expression and practical behaviour" (Solomon 2010, 3) all amount to something like being established (*vyavasthānam, sthitih*, etc.). Jayarāśi's idea is that if the *pramāṇas* cannot be defined, it does us no good to engage in everyday practice (*vyavahāra*) with regard to them. The word "*vyavahāra*" includes "thinking, speaking and acting" (Franco 1994, 302 n. 10) and comes from the root √*vyavahr*, which can mean "to exchange... to be active or busy ... to carry on commerce" (Monier-Williams 1994, 1034). I think of *vyavahāra* as being good enough for making business deals, or to use a contemporary idiom, being close enough for horseshoes and hand grenades.

¹⁷ One could also claim that one or both of the premises are false, which would make the argument unsound. I am not sure if these premises were widely accepted by Indian philosophers of Jayarāśi's day or not. Alternatively, the argument would still be sound if both sides of both biconditionals were false. Since all the variables would be false, ~D and ~(N ∨ Y) would be true, making ~D → ~(N ∨ Y) true, but not merely vacuously true. Since Jayarāśi means to deny D, N, and Y, this would seem to be his take on it.

how could those two (i.e., the means and the object of knowledge) be the subject of everyday practice toward existing things?” (TUS 0.3). The idea here seems to be that if we can’t talk about something without such talk leading to contradictions, perhaps we should rethink whether it’s desirable to continue such conversations. As an analogy consider the idea that if a defendant in a legal case tells a story that involves contradictions, we would say that the jury is right to doubt the defendant’s story. Second, Jayarāṣi might be specifically responding to the fact that many epistemological texts in the Indian tradition begin by defining the means of knowledge and the objects of knowledge. For instance, Dignāga’s *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and Gautama’s *Nyāyasūtra* both begin with discussions of the general definitions of the means of knowledge and the objects of knowledge as well as definitions of specific means of knowledge such as perception, inference, etc. Dignāga begins with general definitions in PS 1.2, and he gives his famous definition of perception in PS 1.3. Gautama lists the means of and objects of knowledge in his list of things one must understand in order to reach the highest good in NS 1.1.1, and his definition of perception is given in NS 1.1.4. Jayarāṣi’s idea seems to be that if he can short circuit the starting point of these sorts of epistemological theories, he can thereby undermine the theories that follow from these attempted definitions.¹⁸

In further interpreting what Jayarāṣi sees as the target of his skepticism, I think it is helpful to consider what Michael Williams calls “epistemological realism.” Williams defines this thesis in the following passage.

Since, if human knowledge is to constitute a genuine kind of thing – and the same goes for knowledge of the external world, knowledge of other

¹⁸ It may be thought that Jayarāṣi’s argument template shows that he is arguing for a form of epistemological skepticism according to which knowledge is impossible because we can’t successfully define the means of knowledge or the objects of knowledge; however, in section 4.6 I will argue that my interpretation of Jayarāṣi as a metaphilosophical skeptic makes more sense of the text as a whole.

minds, and so on – there must be underlying epistemological structures or principles, the traditional epistemologist is committed to *epistemological realism*. This is not realism within epistemology – the thesis that we have knowledge of an objective, mind-independent reality – but something quite different: realism about the objects of epistemological inquiry. (Williams 1996, 108)

Epistemological realism asserts that there are “objects of epistemological inquiry” and that such objects constitute natural kinds that require clarification by epistemologists. Examples of such objects are structures underlying all human knowledge and “knowledge of the world *as such*,” or the idea of one generic source for all knowledge of the external world (Williams 1996, 103).¹⁹ Such “objects” are abstract theoretical objects that Williams, following Stanley Cavell, calls “generic objects.” Williams says, “... claims involving generic objects ... are intended as generic – thus representative – claims. Reference to generic objects is a generalizing device” (Williams 2004, 192). In other words, epistemological realism allows epistemologists to investigate knowledge *in general*, rather than specific episodes of knowledge or specific kinds of knowledge.²⁰ For example, epistemological realism allows epistemologists to wonder how we know anything about the external world *in general* because it says there is an object called “knowledge of the external world” to worry about: “... to suppose that knowledge of the world, as such, is even a potential object of theory or reflection, we have to conceive of our epistemic capacities in a special way” (Williams 2004, 195). Epistemological realism

¹⁹ Williams denies the assumption of epistemological realism and puts forward a somewhat Wittgensteinian version of contextualism in which there is no “knowledge as such” but rather different kinds of inquiry, each governed by its own particular theoretical presuppositions called “methodological necessities.” In denying the intuitive nature of skepticism Williams claims, “The Humean condition and the human condition are not the same” (Williams 1996, 359).

²⁰ A clear example of this generalizing feature is found in Descartes’s First Meditation: “for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested” (Descartes 1985, 12).

is the presupposition that there is a theoretical object of investigation (the over-arching category of all knowledge in general) that has enough theoretical integrity to be worth worrying about.

I obviously do not mean to assimilate Jayarāśi to the whole of Williams's theory, but I want to suggest that epistemological realism is a profitable way to think about what Jayarāśi is denying. Jayarāśi denies the objects of epistemology in the Indian context. He tries to show that we have no reason to consider structures of knowledge called *pramāṇas*. This is not a metaphysical thesis that such things really do not exist, but an epistemological argument that it is impossible to know about such things whether they exist or not.²¹ It is, however, a peculiar sort of epistemological argument, for, rather than putting forward a thesis in epistemology, it amounts to concluding that epistemology as practiced by the *pramāṇavādins* is impossible in its own terms.

4.3 Buddhist epistemological realism: Dignāga and Dharmakīrti

To make the case that Jayarāśi denies epistemological realism, or something very much like it, it will help to show that some of his targets, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, accept something very much like epistemological realism. I will then summarize some of Jayarāśi's arguments against Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, thus, offering an example of his denial of epistemological realism. I should reiterate that epistemological realism is *not* the same as metaphysical realism. Therefore, even if Dignāga or Dharmakīrti were

²¹ Williams is ambiguous on whether his rejection of epistemological realism is more a metaphysical or epistemological affair, but I maintain that it is probably epistemological for Jayarāśi. Furthermore, as a metaphilosophical skeptic, Jayarāśi is not merely denying epistemological realism in order to put forward some other theory, he is working against the general attitude that epistemologists can think of themselves as "getting it right" about epistemology.

metaphysical idealists (which Dharmakīrti, at least, very well may have been), they can still be epistemological realists in that they think there are objects of epistemological inquiry.

In the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, Dignāga claims that the two *pramāṇas* (means of knowledge) are *pratyakṣa* (perception) and *anumāna* (inference).²² Why two? Dignāga answers: “*Pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* are the two *pramāṇas*. There are these two alone, because the knowable object (*prameya*) has two characteristics” (PS 1.2a-c).²³ These two characteristics are *svalakṣana* (particular) and *sāmānyalakṣana* (universal). Dignāga explains that “*pratyakṣa* has the particular characteristic as its object and *anumāna* has the universal characteristic as its object” (PSV 1.2c).²⁴ This is a strictly exclusive dichotomy; any *pramāṇa* must be either *pratyakṣa* or *anumāna*, but not both, and any *prameya* must be either *svalakṣana* or *sāmānyalakṣana*, but not both.²⁵ The key distinguishing feature between *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* is that “*pratyakṣa* is free from *kalpanā* (imagination, conceptual construction)” (PS 1.3a).²⁶ *Kalpanā* is “the joining

²² While *pratyakṣa* is usually translated as “perception” I follow Hayes in thinking that Dignāga seems to mean something closer to what we would mean by “sensation,” since “perception” has the connotation of “seeing something *as* something” whereas “sensation” retains Dignāga’s sense of bare awareness with no concepts whatsoever attached (Hayes 1988a, 134). However, since *pratyakṣa* generally means something closer to “perception” for other Indian philosophers, I will translate it as “perception” to avoid confusion. I will translate *anumāna* as “inference” with the following caveat: “Dignāga’s inference thus embraces, besides our inference, all that we would call judgment, intellection, ideation, thought, reason, etc., every cognitive process, except pure passive sensation” (Stcherbatsky in Shastri 1997, 62). Most often, however, I will try to avoid translating these terms to retain some of their semantic particularity.

²³ *pratyakṣam anumānam ca pramāṇe*
te dve eva. yasmāt

lakṣanadvayam |
prameyam (PS 1.2a-c)

²⁴ *svalakṣanaviṣayam ca pratyakṣam sāmānyalakṣanaviṣayam anumānam ...* PSV 1.2c.

²⁵ To me there has always been a puzzle as to why two *pramāṇas* follow from the existence of two *prameyas*. Part of the answer may be grammatical. *Pramāṇa* is literally “the instrument of veridical cognition” and *prameya* is a gerundive that literally means “that which is to be veridically cognized.” If there are two things to be veridically cognized and these two things are radically dichotomous, it follows that the means or instruments of cognizing these two things must also be dichotomous.

²⁶ *pratyakṣam kalpanāpodham*. PS 1.3a.

together of something with names, universals, etc” (PS 1.3d).²⁷ Any *pramāṇa* that partakes of conceptual construction cannot be *pratyakṣa*, and it cannot be memory, recognition, etc.; hence, it *must* be inference. Dignāga asserts, “Thus, it is established that *pratyakṣa* is free from conceptual construction” (PSV 1.12d).²⁸ Since freedom from conceptual construction is the means of demarcating *pratyakṣa* from *anumāna*, Dignāga has demonstrated his two-fold definition.

While Dharmakīrti generally agrees with Dignāga, I will mention three of his differences. First, Dharmakīrti adds “non-erroneous” (*abhrāntam*) to the definition of *pratyakṣa*. Dignāga is a type of phenomenalist such that we can never be wrong *that* we are sensing such-and-such because conceptualization is the sole source of error, which makes *pratyakṣa* non-erroneous.²⁹ Dharmakīrti, however, added “non-erroneous” perhaps in order to account for perceptual errors based purely on defects in the sense organs such as jaundice or *taimira* eye disease, although there is considerable controversy about Dharmakīrti’s intentions on this issue.³⁰ For Dignāga, every perceptual cognition is non-erroneous, but for Dharmakīrti, some perceptual cognitions are erroneous even though

²⁷ *nāmajātyādiyojanā*. PS 1.3d.

²⁸ *tathā pratyakṣaṃ kalpanāpoḍham iti sthitam*. PSV 1.12d.

²⁹ Dignāga seems to hold the view that *pratyakṣa* cognitions are sense data that are incorrigible or undoubtable in the sense discussed by J. L. Austin (Austin 1962, Ch. 10).

³⁰ The controversy begins with Dignāga’s discussion of error at PS 1.7cd-1.8ab, in which he uses the word “*sataimira*” (lit., “with the *taimira* eye disease”), and his argument against the Nyāya theory of perception, which allows for errors based solely on defects in a sense-organ (PS 1.3.1, Hattori 1968, 122-123 n. 3.7, Taber 2005, 173 n. 96, Franco 1986, 79-80). Jinendrabuddhi and Dharmakīrti take “*sataimira*” as a separate kind of error, thus necessitating the addition of “non-erroneous” to make sense of this kind of non-conceptual error (Hattori 1968, 95-96 n.1.53, Taber 2005, 173 n. 96). Hattori and Franco, however, suggest that Dignāga did not accept “*sataimira*” as a separate kind of error. Hattori translates *sataimira* as “accompanied by obscurity,” which modifies “*pratyakṣābhāsa*” (“false appearance of perception”) (Hattori 1968, 28). Franco’s position is that Dignāga, at least in writing the *vṛtti*, takes even *sataimira* cognitions to be caused by the mind, and thus such cognition is simply a subset of error based on conceptual construction (*bhrānti*): “The eye by itself does not have the capacity of ‘inventing’ the image of caul, what it could do at most is to disturb the mind in such a way, that a mental cognition of a caul is produced” (Franco 1986, 93).

they are free from conceptualization.³¹ Second, Dharmakīrti introduces the concept of *arthakriyā*, which has been translated as “fulfillment of human purpose” or “telic function” (Katsura 1984, 218-9, Dunne 2004, 273). The idea is that *pramāṇas* can successfully lead one to fulfill a purpose.³² Third, Dharmakīrti claims that inference is guaranteed by the “natural relation” (*svabhāvapratibandha*) between the evidence (*hetu*) and that which is to be proved (*sādhya*).³³ This theory is incredibly complex, but the idea seems to be that we can reduce all relations between universals to relations between particulars that have natures (*svabhāva*) that are related causally or as an identity³⁴ (Dunne 2004, 152). These relationships between particulars then guarantee inferential cognitions despite the non-existence of universals.

I claim that the theories of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti constitute a variety of epistemological realism. Why? Because *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* as well as *svalakṣana* and *sāmānyalakṣana* are taken as real objects of epistemological inquiry. The fact that *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* are fundamentally different types of cognitions is not itself conceptually constructed, although all of our words about this distinction are. Dignāgan dualism maps on to a part of reality that forms the object of epistemological inquiry. While one might argue that “natural kinds” do not exist for Buddhists like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti for the reason that universals do not exist, Dharmakīrti does introduce the concept of a “natural relation” (*svabhāvapratibandha*), which explains how inferences

³¹ Franco suggests that Dignāga may have been pushed into this rather radical position by a consideration of the skeptical arguments of Nāgārjuna in MMK and VV, which threatened to undermine *pramāṇa* theory (Franco 1986, 86-92).

³² If I am thirsty and see a glass of water, my purpose of drinking the water will be fulfilled if I go to the glass and drink the water. If my original image of the water was a hologram, however, I will not be able to fulfill my purpose.

³³ For a discussion of the translation of *svabhāvapratibandha*, see Dunne 2004, 151 n. 17.

³⁴ Thus, talk of “fire” and “smoke” as universals can be reduced to causal relationships between causal-continuums of fire-particulars and smoke-particulars and talk of “macadamias” and “nuts” can be reduced to an identity-relation such that any particular macadamia is automatically a particular nut.

can work in the absence of real universals. At the very least, the categories of perception and inference map on to real particular cognitions with real natures and causal relations. In sum, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti are epistemological realists because there are such things as perception, inference, and particulars for their epistemological theories to *be about*.

To get a sense of the flavor of Jayarāśi’s argumentation and how it is intended to support the overall goal of the text and to refute Buddhist epistemological realism, I will look at two arguments in chapter three of the TUS.³⁵ The first argument concludes that the Buddhists cannot explain the difference between *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* and the second argues that we cannot even talk or think about there being two *pramāṇas* in any case! My goal here is not to evaluate these arguments, although this would be a worthwhile pursuit elsewhere; here I simply want to show how a careful reading of these arguments supports my interpretation of Jayarāśi’s overall aim. While I do think these arguments provide significant philosophical challenges that *pramāṇavādins* or those who study them ought to consider, a complete evaluation of whether these arguments successfully achieve their intended purpose will have to wait for a future project.

4.4 The Non-establishment of Difference Argument

This argument takes an explicit *prasaṅga* form and begins with Dignāga’s assertion that there is a strict duality of *pramāṇas*. Jayarāśi asks, “this duality, is it (1) due to a difference of individuals, (2) a difference of form, or (3) a difference of objects?”

³⁵ This chapter concerns the Buddhist definitions of *pramāṇa*. In the first half, Jayarāśi argues that both the definition of *pramāṇa* as the apprehension of a previously unapprehended object (*anadhigatāgantr*) and as that which is non-contradictory (*avisamvādin*) are incoherent. The latter part of the chapter contains the arguments I consider here. Note that both chapter headings and paragraphs were created by Sanghavi and Parikh in their edition of the text (Sanghavi and Parikh 1987, ii).

(TUS 3.3).³⁶ For ease of exposition, I will use a numbering system for the options (*vikalpas*).

1. The first *vikalpa* is easy to dispense, since Jayarāṣi immediately points out that there are innumerable individual cognitions; hence, there would be innumerable *pramāṇas* rather than two. Additionally, individual cognitions cannot be differentiated by their character as cognitions, because they all share this character and as soon as they no longer share this character, they are no longer cognitions!³⁷

2. The second *vikalpa*, representing Dharmakīrti's opinion that the difference is due to a difference of form (*ākāra*), is discarded by first noting, "Perception and inference have no other form except the form of a cognition."³⁸ If they did have some other form, they would no longer be cognitions. Also, a cognition cannot have multiple forms, "because it has an undivided nature."³⁹ I am not clear on exactly why this follows, but the idea seems to be that when universals are denied and only the existence of self-characterized particulars is retained, there is no longer any basis for asserting that one thing can possess more than one form. In this case it may help to think of *ākāra* more as specifically as "appearance" rather than just generally as "form." Then it makes more sense that a bare particular can have only one appearance, especially if one considers the particular from a more phenomenalist point of view in which the particular simply *is* an appearance. It is also possible that Jayarāṣi is thinking of *ākāra* more in the sense of

³⁶ *tad dviṭvaṃ kiṃ vyaktibhedenākārabhedena viśayabhedena vā?* TUS 3.3.

³⁷ All of my characterizations of Jayarāṣi's "Non-establishment of Difference Argument" in the next few pages come from TUS 3.3 -3.332 unless otherwise noted.

³⁸ *jñānākāravatyirekeṇa pratyakṣānumāṇayor nākārāntaram asti.* TUS 3.32.

³⁹ *tasyābhinnātmakatvāt.* TUS 3.32.

rūpa, in which case one thing can only have one nature assuming that *ākāra*, *rūpa*, and *ātma* all refer to a thing's single nature, in this case the nature of being a cognition.⁴⁰

3. After dispensing with *vikalpas* one (difference in individuals) and two (difference in form), Jayarāśi moves to the third, on which he spends most of his time developing *prasaṅgas* within *prasaṅgas*. This was the view that the difference in *pramāṇas* is due to the difference in objects.

3.1. Jayarāśi begins with *anumāna* and asks, "Is it (i.e., the inferential cognition) (1) that which has a particular such as fire, etc., as its object, (2) that which has an existing universal as its object, (3) that which has an unreal universal for its object, (4) that which is without an object, or (5) that which has the rest of itself as its object?" (TUS 3.331).⁴¹

3.1.1. For the first "sub-*vikalpa*," Jayarāśi points out that if inference has the particular as its object, then it is the same as *pratyakṣa*, which also has the particular as its object. Jayarāśi considers the Dharmakīrtian objection that the general property (that this is a fire) is grasped by *anumāna*, while the specific property (*this* fire) is grasped by *pratyakṣa*; even then, Jayarāśi answers, this "general property" is a particular general property and there is still no difference.

3.1.2. The second *vikalpa* was that inference has an existing universal as its object. This would make both *pramāṇas* the same, since the universal would become a particular. Franco reconstructs a reason for this in Buddhist terms: "everything existing is a particular; the universal exists; therefore the universal is a particular" (Franco 1994, 426 n. 176). To elaborate on Franco's point, one might say that if the universal were an

⁴⁰ The latter interpretation was suggested by John Taber (personal communication).

⁴¹ *kim agnyādisvalakṣaṇaviśayaṃ vidyamānasāmānyaviśayam apāramārthikasāmānyaviśayaṃ vā nirviśayaṃ vā svāmśaviśayaṃ vā?* TUS 3.331.

existing thing with causal efficacy, it would be no different than a particular in that sense. Furthermore, according to the Buddhists, universals, being eternal, cannot cause cognition or give their forms to cognitions. Lastly, if *anumāna* grasps existing universals, then the Buddhists could not maintain that inference is ultimately erroneous (*bhrānta*), because it would be grasping an existing thing.

3.1.3. The third *vikalpa* was that inference has a nonexistent universal as its object. Jayarāṣi replies, “then this (i.e., inferential cognition) is not erroneous, because a non-existent object exists as its own form” (TUS 3.331).⁴² He probably means that the object (*viśaya*) as intentional content exists in virtue of just being a mental form, and thus it is not truly nonexistent.⁴³ He also repeats the point that a nonexistent thing can neither cause cognitions nor provide its form to them; if it could, it would be real, just like a particular, and hence, there would be no difference between a particular and a universal.⁴⁴

3.1.4. The fourth *vikalpa* was that inference is without an object. Jayarāṣi cleverly notices that if inference has no object, then there is no object to be different than the object of *pratyakṣa*. Neither could it be erroneous since erroneousness is a relation between an object and a cognition.

3.1.5. The fifth *vikalpa* was that inference has a portion of itself (*svāmṣa*) as an object. The idea seems to be that one part of the inferential cognition would constitute the object of another part of the same cognition. Perhaps this means that an inference would function by reasoning about an introspected past experience, which would take

⁴² *na tarhi tasya bhrāntatāsataḥ svena rūpeṇa vidyamānatvāt*. TUS 3.331.

⁴³ Franco suggests that Jayarāṣi could also be referring to an earlier part of the TUS (1.1ba) “where he proves that there is no difference between the objects of valid and false cognitions” (Franco 1994, 428 n. 180). In that section, Jayarāṣi argues that a cognition cannot be sublated by either an object or a cognition, and that false cognitions can have causal efficacy (*arthakriyā*) (TUS 1.1ba-1.1baa-b). See also Solomon 2010, 33-37.

⁴⁴ On this point, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti might answer that, while universals are unreal, the process of exclusion (*apoha*) by which “universals” are conceptually constructed is ultimately caused by particulars.

place within a single cognition, although Jayarāśi does not say exactly what he means here.⁴⁵ He does say that if it is the case that an inferential cognition has a portion of itself as its object, then it has a particular (i.e., a particular part of a cognition) as an object, not a universal. Nor would inference be erroneous, “because of the non-deluding of a portion of itself” (TUS 3.331).⁴⁶ An inferential cognition is alleged to be erroneous because the whole thing is conceptualized, not because one part of the cognition deludes the other.

3.2. Having tried to show that it is impossible to establish that *anumāna* is different than *pratyakṣa*, Jayarāśi turns to show that it is also impossible to establish that *pratyakṣa* is different than *anumāna*. He gives three more *vikalpas*: “Is it (i.e., *pratyakṣa*) (1) that which has a particular such as form, etc. as its object, (2) that which has itself as its object, or (3) that which has both [a particular and itself] as its object?” (TUS 3.332).⁴⁷

3.2.1. The first sub-*vikalpa* is incorrect, since Buddhists maintain that every cognition cognizes itself and “because when that [cognition] is not cognized, there is no cognition of that [object]” (TUS 3.332).⁴⁸ The idea here is that if there were *only* cognition of the object in the absence of self-cognition, then one would not even know the object itself. Dharmakīrti uses this idea in his arguments for the self-luminosity (*svaprakāśa*) of cognition; he claims that “seeing an object is not established for a person who has not apprehended [one’s own] perception” (PVin 1.54).⁴⁹ The evidence for an

⁴⁵ John Taber (personal communication) suggested that this could also be an idealist option in which inference operates on a form that arises within a cognition itself.

⁴⁶ *svāṃśasyāvañcanāt*. TUS 3.331. While Jayarāśi probably intends us to resolve the *sandhi* as “*avañcana*” (non-delusion), it is possible he intends “*āvañcana*,” which would mean that the parts of a cognition are always connected or literally are “flowing near” (*āvañcana*) each other (Monier-Williams 1994, 154). In this case, the parts of a cognition cannot be separated in order for one part to lead the other astray.

⁴⁷ *rūpādisvalakṣanaviṣayam ātmaviṣayam ubhayaviṣayam vā?* TUS 3.332.

⁴⁸ *tadanavaḡatāv etadḡatyabhāvāt*. TUS 3.332.

⁴⁹ *apratyakṣopalambhasya nārthadrṣṭiḡ prasidhyati*. PVin 1.54. For further discussion of Dharmakīrti’s argument, see Franco 1994, 429-430 n.183.

object's existence is a cognition of it, and the evidence for a cognition is an apprehension of itself, so there must be an apprehension of the cognition in order for there to be evidence of the object itself. Hence, perception cannot, according to the Buddhist theory, have merely a particular as an object.

3.2.2. The second *vikalpa* was that the cognition would be its own object. This is not possible, because to be an object of cognition is both to cause that cognition and give the form to the cognition. But, nothing can cause itself or give its own form to itself, so it cannot be that cognition has only itself as an object. Furthermore, if cognition has only itself as an object, there is no way to assert a difference between *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*, since both kinds of cognitions would have themselves as objects.

3.2.3. The third *vikalpa* was that both the cognition and the particular are the object of *pratyakṣa*.

This is also incorrect, because of the fact that one apprehension is established by means of the exclusion of a second form. And if grasping a cognition is just grasping a visible form, then either the form would have the form/nature of the cognition (*jñānarūpatā*), the cognition would have the form/nature of the form (*rūparūpatā*), or grasping the form would not establish the form. (TUS 3.332)⁵⁰

The first point is that to grasp one form, the cognition must exclude all others and cannot grasp any others. Hence, a cognition cannot grasp both the object and itself at the same time. The second point is that even if one claims that one cognition somehow simultaneously apprehends itself and a visible form, then either one must have the form of the other (and thus the cognition still apprehends only one form) or the cognition

⁵⁰ *tad apy ayuktam, ekopalambhasya dvitīyākāraparihāreṇa vyavasthitatvāt. yadi ca rūpagrhitir eva jñānagrhitī, tadā rūpasya jñānarūpatā, jñānasya vā rūparūpatā, rūpagrhitir vā rūpavyavasthāpakatvam.* TUS 3.332. I have translated “*rūpagrhitī*” as “grasping a visible form” as opposed to simply “grasping a form,” since Jayarāśi is referring back to *vikalpa* 3.2.1 where he considers the option that perception is “causing to see merely a visible form, etc.” (*rūpādīmātrālocaka*). It makes more sense to take “*rūpa*” as “visible form” to fit with “*ālocaka*” (“causing to see”) (TUS 3.332).

cannot establish the object, along the same lines discussed in the first *vikalpa* (3.2.1). In any case, Jayarāṣi asserts, “And furthermore we do not see one thing with a duality of forms” (TUS 3.332).⁵¹ If Jayarāṣi is right that we never observe these alleged dual-formed cognitions, this ought to militate against accepting them as firmly established.

Thus, by a systematic process of elimination, Jayarāṣi tries to show that there is no possible avenue for establishing that there is any ultimate distinction between *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*.⁵²

4.5 The Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument

Almost as an afterthought, Jayarāṣi offers another argument meant to clinch his case. I call this second argument “The Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument.” It is, as Franco claims, “one of the most brilliant arguments in the TUS” (Franco 1994, 430). Jayarāṣi begins with the notion that *pratyakṣa* apprehends itself and *anumāna* apprehends itself, but neither can apprehend the other according to Dignāga’s strict dualism. Jayarāṣi concludes, “Thus, talking or thinking about the number [of *pramāṇas*]

⁵¹ *na caikasyākāradvayaṃ paśyāmaḥ*. TUS 3.332.

⁵² While Jayarāṣi has offered some interesting challenges to their views, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti could reply to Jayarāṣi’s arguments. For instance, Dignāga might ask why it is that one cognition cannot have two forms. Jayarāṣi asserts this in “The Non-establishment of Difference Argument” (*vikalpas* 2 and 3.2.3). Perhaps these are options for establishing the difference between perception and inference, since a perception would have a particular and itself as its object while an inference would have a universal and itself as its object. Jayarāṣi may be right that Dignāga is committed to the ontological reality of only one form per object, since *pramāṇa* and *pramāṇa-phala* are ultimately identical. Even so, Dignāga has established that a single cognition has two-forms (*dvi-rūpa*), namely, the form of itself and the form of the object. Dignāga means that a single cognition, being a unique particular, ultimately has just one form, but that that form itself has two aspects; therefore, the difference between perception and inference is established by the different aspects of their forms. But then, Jayarāṣi might ask, if one takes *rūpa* or *ākāra* in the sense of “appearance,” Dignāgan phenomenalism makes it difficult to see how one particular can have more than one appearance if that particular simply *is* an appearance.

being two is impossible” (TUS 3.3a).⁵³ Franco spells out the presupposition that makes the argument work:

In order to determine the number of means of valid cognition, one has to have them all as the object of one and the same cognition. However, according to the Buddhists, a cognition is not apprehended by another cognition, but only by itself. Nor is there an *ātman* which could coordinate the different cognitions. Thus, one may perceive perception by perception, and inference by inference, but never both at the same time. Consequently, whatever the number of means of valid cognition may be, there is no way of knowing it. (Franco 1994, 430 n. 184)

Thus, Jayarāṣi’s argument rules out the possibility of even considering the Buddhist thesis that there are two *pramāṇas*. He ends the chapter with the following: “And when this (i.e., there being two *pramāṇas*) is not possible, saying ‘There are only two *pramāṇas*’ is the gesticulation of a fool” (TUS 3.3a).⁵⁴

One might think that this argument is obviously mistaken, since both *pramāṇas* could be the object of an inferential cognition. Jayarāṣi considers such an objection from a Buddhist *pūrvapakṣin*: “But then someone might object that the ascertainment of two [*pramāṇas*] is due to conceptualization. This is not correct. Even that conceptualization does not grasp two [*pramāṇas*], because it concludes in the cognition of itself. Or if it did grasp [two *pramāṇas*], then the [Buddhist] position would be abandoned” (TUS 3.3a).⁵⁵ Jayarāṣi is pointing out that a conceptual cognition by definition cannot apprehend a perceptual cognition directly. If it could, Buddhists would abandon their

⁵³ *evaṃ dvitvasaṅkhyāvyavahārānupapattiḥ*. TUS 3.3a. Candrakīrti offers a similar argument against Dignāga, which suggests that Jayarāṣi may have been familiar with Madhyamaka. “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).

⁵⁴ *tadanupapattau ca dve eveti jaḍaceṣṭitam*. TUS 3.3a. Perhaps one feature shared by many Cārvākas is that they do not consider *ad hominem* attacks to be unfair!

⁵⁵ *atha vikalpena dvayāvadhāraṇam iti cet. tad ayuktam, asāv apy ātmasaṃvedanaparyavasitatvān na dvayaṃ grhṇāti. grahaṇe vābhyupetaḥānam*. TUS 3.3a.

position that perception is free from conceptualization, because this alleged cognition capable of ascertaining both perception and inference would be conceptual, and by that fact, not perceptual. Therefore, it could not ascertain perception. Jayarāṣi may also be alluding to the Buddhist position of momentariness: since the conceptual cognition terminates in a single moment, it cannot possibly last into a second moment in order to apprehend perception as well. Of course, there could be further Buddhist rejoinders to this argument; perhaps inferential cognitions can be *about* perceptual cognitions without revoking the non-conceptual status of the perceptual cognition, or maybe an appeal to exclusion (*apoha*) might be used to show that inferential cognitions can have some causal relation to perceptual cognitions of ultimately real particulars. Furthermore, Buddhists might claim that if Jayarāṣi were correct that cognitions terminate in themselves, then no *pramāṇa* would ever apprehend any fact beyond itself, but this is clearly not what Dignāga claims. Thus, it might be thought that Jayarāṣi is misrepresenting the theory and committing the straw man fallacy.

I think that Jayarāṣi raises a real problem for Dignāga's epistemology, even if it may not be an insurmountable problem. Dan Arnold raises a similar issue with help from Wilfrid Sellars's idea of the Myth of the Given. The idea is that non-conceptual states cannot *justify* anything insofar as justification requires something conceptual that is capable of being entered into what Sellars calls the "logical space of reasons." In other words, if a cognition is non-conceptual, it can't be used to justify a belief such as the belief that there are two *pramāṇas*. At best, it might *cause* such a belief. Now, Dignāga or Dharmakīrti might say that such a causal relation is good enough. However, as Arnold suggests,

... if perception's privileged status is a function of its having been caused by its object, and if discursive cognitions are defined by their adding something (insofar as their content involves, by definition, some object that is not immediately present), then how can one ever be sure that what one is thinking *about*, when entertaining some proposition, is in any sense the same thing that was perceived? (Arnold 2005, 38)

Arnold suggests that this leads to a self-referential problem:

... one might ask what reasons could be given, in their own account, to support the correlated beliefs that only causally efficacious objects are 'real' and ... that only directly caused cognitions are finally veridical. ... The truth of their own statement of this claim is something that could be known only inferentially; but their whole epistemological set-up leads any inferential knowledge to be regarded as suspect. (Arnold 2005, 42)

Arnold is suggesting that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti cannot claim that perception is both epistemically fundamental and non-conceptual; furthermore, given that their whole theory must be inferred and that inferential knowledge is never as certain as perceptual knowledge, one wonders about the status of the theory itself. I think Arnold's elaboration gives a more detailed basis of Jayarāśi's Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument. Pure perception can't be inferential and thus can't be a justification for an epistemological theory; inference is always conceptual, but we can't be sure that our inferences allegedly *about* perception are in fact *caused* by perception – while inference might yield knowledge about inference, we can never be sure that it yields knowledge about perception. Therefore, this philosophical problem supports Jayarāśi's conclusion that if Dignāga and Dharmakīrti were right, we could never know whether their theory is correct.

Furthermore, if Arnold is right that one of Dharmakīrti's most important commentators, Dharmottara, attempted to solve this problem by claiming that even perceptual cognitions might have some sort of propositional, conceptual content (Arnold

2005, 42-48), this would show that the kind of problem Jayarāśi raises was an issue taken seriously by philosophers in the tradition after Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. This suggests that the sorts of considerations found in Jayarāśi's argument are problems that Buddhist epistemologists ought to take seriously, or at that some *did* take these problems seriously.

While my goal in this chapter is mainly to give an account of what Jayarāśi's arguments are rather than to evaluate them, I hope to have suggested that some of Jayarāśi's arguments can at least plausibly be thought of as genuine philosophical problems for epistemological theories such as Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's. While Jayarāśi may not offer a definitive refutation of such theories, I will argue in chapter five that the Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument is one example of the kind of problem that demonstrates how metaphilosophical skepticism is a persistent issue in several philosophical traditions.

4.6 Jayarāśi's general procedure

It should be noted that I have only discussed a small part of the TUS. Jayarāśi criticizes other schools of his day just as forcefully (Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya, Grammarians, etc.), so it should not be thought that he has some specifically anti-Buddhist agenda. His philosophical destruction is an equal-opportunity policy.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Jayarāśi does not spend equal time criticizing every school. Vedāntins and Jains are not discussed in great detail and Madhyamaka is not mentioned at all. Jayarāśi discusses what seems to be an early pre-Śāṅkara version of Vedānta in the chapter on the soul (TUS, p. 81) and he refutes the Jain theories of the soul (TUS, p. 76-79), but spends little effort on the epistemological doctrines of either school. There is an affinity between Jayarāśi and Madhyamaka in style of argument and, if I am correct, in the general attitude of metaphilosophical skepticism. Perhaps Jayarāśi simply did not feel the need to criticize a school so similar to himself, although Jayarāśi would reject the Buddhist religious aspects of Madhyamaka. It is also possible, as Hayes has argued (Hayes 1994), that Madhyamaka was simply never a popular or philosophically important school in classical India. Of course, why Jayarāśi chose to criticize the schools he did remains a matter of speculation. It could very well be that these were simply the schools with which he was familiar for completely contingent personal reasons.

However, by delving into some of his specific arguments against Buddhist epistemology, I hope to have shown three interesting features of Jayarāṣi's general procedure. First, Jayarāṣi uses *prasaṅga* arguments along the lines of *vitaṇḍā* debate. He uses the commitments of his opponents to draw out the unwanted consequences (*prasaṅga*) of these views without putting forward any counter-thesis of his own (thus it should not be thought that in denying epistemological realism Jayarāṣi affirms some theory of epistemological *anti*-realism). Second, Jayarāṣi's arguments are epistemological as shown especially in the "The Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument" and by the fact that his conclusions are almost always that some thesis is not *established*, as opposed to claiming that some object of theory does not exist. Jayarāṣi is not putting forward a metaphysical theory or saying that epistemologists are wrong about a particular thesis in epistemology; rather he is doubting that it is possible to know anything whatsoever about the topics of epistemology. Jayarāṣi tries to invent the epistemology to end all epistemology. Third, Jayarāṣi intends the arguments of the TUS to work together to show that one cannot establish anything about the *pramāṇas* or the *prameyas*. As Stephen Phillips suggests, "the bottom line seems to be that we need not bother ourselves, according to Jayarāṣi, with what philosophers have to say, and should go on with our lives" (Phillips 1995, 73).

Some readers might object that Jayarāṣi's arguments are not directed toward the general rejection of epistemology as such, but rather toward specific philosophical targets. After all, the TUS contains chapters on Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Buddhism, Sāṃkhya, etc., but no chapter on epistemology in general. Thus, my interpretation goes too far in attributing to Jayarāṣi such a general attack on epistemology.

My response to this objection is that there are two reasons to attribute a general rejection of epistemology to Jayarāṣi. First, the introduction of the text contains an argument template indicating Jayarāṣi's general strategy, which is to show that none of the existing definitions of *pramāṇas* can be established. Somewhat like Pyrrhonian modes such as the Mode of Infinite Regress or the Mode of Circularity (PH 1.15), Jayarāṣi's argument in the introduction is meant to be a basic argument pattern that can be applied anytime a philosopher attempts to establish a *pramāṇa* theory. The task of the TUS is to show how this general template can be applied to the most popular philosophical schools of the day, but I can see no reason why Jayarāṣi would not apply the same template to any other proposed definition of *pramāṇas*. I imagine that if a philosopher asked Jayarāṣi what he's rebelling against, much like Marlon Brando's character in the film *The Wild One*, he'd reply, "What've you got?"

Second, my interpretation of Jayarāṣi as a metaphilosophical skeptic makes more sense of the text as a whole. If Jayarāṣi had some specific epistemological quibble with the schools he critiques, one would expect him at some point to explain what these specific quibbles are. Instead, however, one finds Jayarāṣi using a particular point against one school, and then later in the text making the opposite point against another school. For instance, in arguing against the Naiyāyikas, he says that universals can't exist (TUS 1.13a2) and a few chapters later he also rejects the Buddhist rejection of universals (TUS 4.25d). It might seem that he is simultaneously denying and affirming the existence of universals. But consider the following explanation by Eli Franco.

Unless we want to affirm that they are simple contradictions and that the man is a fool, something like the following explanation has to be accepted: Jayarāṣi affirms statements incompatible with his opponent's view, and which he thinks the opponent cannot refute without getting himself into

trouble ... While dealing with different theories, Jayarāśi makes different statements in the different corresponding contexts ... Thus all affirmations of Jayarāśi's, whether they are expressed in a positive or in a negative form, should be understood as negations of their opposite, which do not affirm anything at all. (Franco 1984, 128-129)

While Jayarāśi doesn't make the Sanskrit grammatical distinction between *prasajya* and *paryudāsa* negation, Jayarāśi's negations should be understood as *prasajya* negations, meaning that his negations do not accept the presuppositions of his opponents. The stock example of a *prasajya* negation is "this is not a Brahmin" whereas a *paryudāsa* negation is "this is a non-Brahmin." The first negation does not assume that there is a person or object present, it simply denies the proposition "this is a Brahmin." The second negation, on the other hand, assumes that there is a person present who belongs to some other class; this is a negation of the term "Brahmin." Jan Westerhoff calls *prasajya* and *paryudāsa* negations "non-implicational propositional negation" and "implicational term negation" respectively (Westerhoff 2006, 369).⁵⁷ Since Jayarāśi uses *prasajya* or non-implicational propositional negations, I should reiterate once again that his denial of epistemological realism does not at all imply that he accepts some theory of "epistemological anti-realism," in which one continues to engage in epistemology without assuming the existence of real epistemological objects such as *pramāṇas*.

While some scholars have lamented the "unprincipled" nature of Jayarāśi's skepticism in that he has no ultimate philosophical point (Phillips 1995, 73), as a radical metaphilosophical skeptic being unprincipled *is the point*: he does not offer any ultimate philosophical illumination but rather an escape from any such attempt. If Jayarāśi had some principled philosophical point, his text would be quite puzzling, if not entirely

⁵⁷ Westerhoff gives a clear exposition of the *prasajya-paryudāsa* distinction and its role in understanding the Madhyamaka *catuskoṭi*. He also makes an interesting comparison to the contemporary distinction between choice negation and exclusion negation (Westerhoff 2006, 368-370).

incoherent. But if you look at him as a radical metaphilosophical skeptic who uses any available means for the purpose of undermining philosophers' confidence in their theories, his eclectic strategies make perfect sense. One would expect to find different strategies employed for different arguments – you need the right tool for each job. This would be more effective in serving the ultimate goal of overturning philosophical impulses in general.

Another possible objection to my interpretation is that the TUS tells us almost nothing about what Jayarāṣi wants to accomplish with all these *prasaṅgas*, so my interpretation goes far beyond the available textual evidence. First of all, I admit that Jayarāṣi says very little about his intentions, but we can glean something from the introduction, which I have already discussed, and from a provocative statement near the end of the text, which I will discuss in the next section. Second, the TUS is not all that unusual among classical Indian texts in being amenable to multiple interpretations. Nāgārjuna's MMK is perhaps the most conspicuous example, since Nāgārjuna has been seen as everything from a preeminent metaphysician to a preeminent anti-metaphysician, from a skeptic to a mystic, from an anti-realist to a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*. I am not claiming that all of these interpretations are equally valid (I think the skeptical interpretation I developed in the previous chapter is best), but it is reasonable to suspect at this point that further appeals to textual evidence by themselves are not going to solve the interpretive issues involved in the MMK. While Jayarāṣi's TUS has not received a panoply of interpretations that the MMK has received, I don't think that simple citations of textual evidence are going to give a definitive answer about how to interpret the TUS, either. We need to appeal to other criteria, such as the principle of charity. While it is

possible to read Jayarāśi as an epistemological skeptic who concludes that all knowledge claims are invalid, the problem with this interpretation is, as I pointed out earlier, that it leaves Jayarāśi with no response to an obvious charge that he contradicts himself. As I will argue, reading Jayarāśi as a metaphilosophical skeptic is more charitable, since it makes sense of what look like flatly contradictory statements and it gives him a response to the self-refutation objection.

Some readers might wonder whether Jayarāśi could be compared more favorably with contemporary varieties of anti-realist critiques of traditional epistemology; rather than a skeptic, perhaps Jayarāśi is really an anti-realist critic of realist epistemology. If the target of his critique is, as I have argued, something called epistemological realism, then perhaps it makes sense to think of him as an epistemological anti-realist. This would be to see Jayarāśi along similar lines as the anti-realist interpretation of Nāgārjuna given by Mark Siderits and Jan Westerhoff.⁵⁸

Although I argued against an anti-realist interpretation of Nāgārjuna in the previous chapter, I admit that anti-realism makes a certain amount of sense with regard to phase one of Nāgārjuna's procedure. However, Jayarāśi doesn't seem to have anything resembling the positive philosophical intentions of Nāgārjuna's phase one. Jayarāśi does make one brief statement about the results of his philosophical destruction, but there is nothing in the TUS that corresponds to Nāgārjuna's endorsement of emptiness; there is simply no part of the TUS that could be construed as a positive endorsement of an anti-realist epistemology. Granted, my interpretation also goes beyond the text just as an anti-realist interpretation of Jayarāśi would, but I make charitable sense of the text without

⁵⁸ See chapter three, especially sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.5, and 3.6, for my discussion of anti-realist interpretations of Nāgārjuna.

importing a positive epistemological theory into an almost wholly negative text. It may sound odd to call anti-realist epistemologies positive theories; however, such theories make claims about both what knowledge is and what it is not (e.g., knowledge lacks a single foundation, it does not require semantic realism, it is dependent on context, etc.). But there are no similar claims or philosophically constructive tendencies in the TUS. Given the general negative thrust of the text, I personally think Jayarāśi would critique an anti-realist epistemology just as forcefully as he would critique any other epistemology, although of course we have no way of knowing what an 8th century philosopher would say about 20th and 21st century developments. It could be that Jayarāśi would delight in contemporary developments and change his destructive ways, but I find it more likely that Jayarāśi would place anti-realism on his list of theories that cannot be established.

Other readers might object that my interpretation adds nothing new to the study of Jayarāśi in particular or Indian philosophy in general. After all, my reading of Jayarāśi relies on insights from previous scholars. Additionally, Jayarāśian skepticism is similar to recent skeptical interpretations of Nāgārjuna, so it has already been established that this type of skepticism exists in classical Indian thought. I admit that I have been influenced by the work I have cited here. I am particularly indebted to Eli Franco's groundbreaking work on Jayarāśi. However, I think my interpretation is unique in identifying the target and scope of Jayarāśi's skepticism. Franco, for instance, doesn't distinguish Jayarāśi's skepticism from epistemological skepticism; he defines skepticism as "a philosophical attitude which consists of doubting knowledge claims in all areas" (Franco 1994, 1), and he includes Jayarāśi in the class of skeptics for whom "the real issue is how to face and react to the lack of certainty in all matters from everyday life to

religious beliefs and scientific theories” (Franco 1994, 42). Other scholars have maintained that Jayarāśi has some positive views. For instance, Piotr Balcerowicz claims that Jayarāśi actually denied the existence of universals and that it is possible that “what Jayarāśi had in mind was that for all our practical activities ... the world of our actions ... is ‘here and now’ and retains its ultimate validity, even though we are incapable of its proper philosophical analysis” (Balcerowicz 2011, sec. 2.3). Also, Shuchita Mehta claims that Jayarāśi affirms that “no verbal expressions can grasp the ‘Tattva’” (Mehta 2010, xvi).

On the other hand, I have argued that Jayarāśi is not a global epistemological skeptic and does not make any philosophical claims. Rather, he is a metaphilosophical skeptic with a particular emphasis on epistemology. His doubts are not as far as I can tell extended to a scope so wide as “knowledge claims in all areas.” Neither does he discuss a lack of certainty in everyday or scientific matters, nor does he make any positive philosophical claims, even about the limits of human knowledge or what lies beyond such knowledge. Instead, the targets of his negative arguments are the philosophical schools of his day. As a skeptical Cārvāka, he sees a connection between his critique of epistemology and the Cārvāka critique of religious views.

While I think Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi may have a similar skeptical attitude, there is a major difference in that if Nāgārjuna is a skeptic, the point of Nāgārjunian skepticism would be to overcome attachment to philosophical views, which is in line with the Buddhist goal of overcoming suffering that arises from attachment. Jayarāśi, however, is not a Buddhist. The point of Jayarāśian skepticism is to overcome epistemology, which was often used in classical India to bolster religious worldviews (including Buddhism).

Jayarāṣi hopes to be free, not from *samsāra*, but from the epistemological dogmatism that detracts from one's enjoyment of everyday life. Therefore, Jayarāṣi expands our understanding of Indian skepticism by showing us what a uniquely Cārvāka form of skepticism looks like. As the only complete, primary text of the Cārvāka school currently available, the TUS is well worth our attempts to understand it more thoroughly.

To sum up this section, we should read Jayarāṣi as a skeptic about philosophy (especially epistemology) for three reasons. First, my interpretation makes sense of the observation that the template in the introduction of the TUS can be applied to *pramāṇa* theories more generally. Second, it is a more charitable interpretation in that it makes sense of the text without attributing to Jayarāṣi obvious problems of self-contradiction and self-refutation. Third, skepticism about epistemology makes more sense of the negative character of the TUS than would any sort of interpretation that attributes to Jayarāṣi an anti-realist epistemology. In addition to these reasons in its favor, my interpretation adds to our understanding of Indian philosophy; while I rely on the work of previous scholars, my interpretation is unique in how I identify the target and scope of Jayarāṣi's skepticism and its place in classical Indian philosophy.

I am willing to give Jayarāṣi the benefit of the doubt that he is not the self-refuting buffoon a casual reading of the text might suggest. Jayarāṣi is up to something interesting after all, but the TUS is not a constructive work of philosophical system-building. That is simply not Jayarāṣi's intention. What I think his intention is will be the subject of the remaining sections.

4.7 Jayarāṣi and contextualism

While Jayarāṣi is not interested in constructing epistemological theories, there may be, nonetheless, some kinds of knowledge or cognitions that we are able to talk about, namely, those at the level of everyday practice (*vyavahāra*). Jayarāṣi ends the TUS with a rare positive statement, which explains what might result from his philosophical destruction: “When, in this way, the principles are entirely destroyed, all everyday practices are made delightful, because they are not deliberated” (TUS 14.5).⁵⁹ As long as we stick with our quotidian pretheoretical opinions about what it means to know or cognize things, maybe there is no problem. Perhaps the problem only comes when we enter philosophical terrain.

My inspiration for this suggestion comes from contextualism in contemporary epistemology, which is the idea is that knowledge is somehow relative to context. This can be construed in several ways. For David Annis justification is relative (Annis 1978). For Michael Williams, knowledge is relative to its specific domain of inquiry (Williams 1996, 2004). The most common type of contextualism, which may be called semantic contextualism, claims that *ascriptions* of knowledge, such as “S knows that P,” are context sensitive. Since this is an epistemological theory about ascriptions of knowledge, I’ll call this “semantic contextualism in epistemology” to distinguish it from forms of contextualism about language more generally. Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose, and David Lewis are prominent defenders of semantic contextualism in epistemology (Cohen 2000, DeRose 1995, Lewis 1999). Cohen explains: “the truth value of sentences containing the

⁵⁹ Franco gives his translation of this passage in his introduction (Franco 1994, 44). It appears in the Sanghavi and Parikh edition as follows: *tad evam upapluteṣv eva tattveṣv avicāritaramaṇīyāḥ sarve vyavahārā ghaṭanta iti*. (TUS p. 125).

words ‘know’ and its cognates will depend on contextually determined standards” and these standards are the “contexts of ascription” which “vary depending on things like the purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions, etc., of the speakers who utter these sentences” (Cohen 2000, 94). To say “Sally knows that she has hands” is true when uttered in normal everyday contexts, but false when uttered in epistemological contexts, such as a philosophy classroom. This shift is the result of the standards used in the context of the discussion; the standards are set by the discussants, although not necessarily explicitly. Semantic contextualism in epistemology is thought of as a way to make sense of external world skepticism without it having much impact in non-epistemological contexts.

Before going on, I should distinguish semantic contextualism in epistemology from other kinds of contextualism. The contextualist epistemology Westerhoff (2010) wants to attribute to Nāgārjuna in the VV is closer to Michael Williams’s issue contextualism in which knowledge is relative to a specific issue or subject that structures a context of inquiry, although Williams does not endorse semantic or metaphysical anti-realism (Williams 1996, Ch. 6).⁶⁰ The difference here is that Williams and Westerhoff’s Nāgārjuna see as many contexts as there are contexts of inquiry (e.g., a context for astronomy, a context for epistemology, a context for musical theory, a context for zoology, etc.); however, semantic contextualism in epistemology requires only two contexts: epistemology and regular life outside epistemology. Another famous example of what might be called contextualism is a contextualism about meaning in classical Indian philosophy of language expressed most famously by Grammarians such as

⁶⁰ Williams argues that we should be deflationists about truth and that “...metaphysical realism has no particular connection with any sceptical problems or answer to them” (Williams 1996, 266).

Bhartṛhari. As opposed to theories of meaning given by Bhaṭṭa Mīmāṃsā in which words have atomic meaning independent of sentences, Bhartṛhari's sentence holism states that a word only has meaning in the context of a sentence.⁶¹ This debate concerns the phenomenon of meaning in general and focuses on the relationship between words and sentences; semantic contextualism in epistemology, on the other hand, is a theory specifically about the meaning of epistemic terms and says nothing about whether such terms are meaningful atomically or in the context of a sentence.

While Jayarāṣi wouldn't accept semantic contextualism as an epistemological theory, perhaps we can make sense of his remarks about everyday practice (*vyavahāra*) by appealing to the distinction between the contexts of epistemology and regular life that lies at the heart of semantic contextualism in epistemology. If one goes down the rabbit-hole of epistemology, one will see that the whole enterprise of establishing *pramāṇas* is futile. If one avoids epistemology, then perhaps there is no problem at all – one can go on discussing knowledge in an everyday context. In the context of epistemology, epistemology self-destructs; in the context of everyday practice, there is no need for epistemology.⁶²

Since using epistemic terms is usually thought of as part of everyday practice (it's hard to imagine everyday practice without any epistemic terms at all), I think it's very likely that Jayarāṣi himself would continue to use such terms as long as he's in the

⁶¹ For a collection on Bhartṛhari that includes several papers on his sentence holism, see Bhate and Bronkhorst 1993. Sen and Matilal (1988) discuss the debates between Bhartṛhari, the Prabhākāra Mīmāṃsakas, and the Bhaṭṭa Mīmāṃsakas, and they compare these debates to contemporary discussions of Frege's context principle.

⁶² Jayarāṣi's attitude toward epistemology and the therapeutic nature of his task can be compared with Michael Williams's interpretation of Sextus. According to Williams, Sextus's Pyrrhonism is entirely practical, having no theoretical commitments whatsoever and when Sextus discusses distinctively epistemological questions he is not putting forward an epistemological theory, but rather he "extends *epochē* into epistemology itself" (Williams 1988, 586). However, Jayarāṣi's goal is not *epochē* (suspension of judgment), but a purging of any basis on which to make any theoretical judgments about epistemology.

everyday context. To give an example, Jayarāṣi might utter both of the following sentences:

1. “It is not the case that Devadatta has a perception of a cup.” [in the context of epistemology]
2. “Devadatta sees a cup.” [in the context of everyday practice]

While it initially appears that these sentences directly contradict each other (since seeing is a variety of perception), there is no contradiction, because the two sentences are uttered in different contexts. From within the context of epistemology, Jayarāṣi would attempt (and fail) to adequately define epistemic terms like “perception” (*pratyakṣa*) within the philosophical framework given by his opponents; thus, it turns out that poor Devadatta doesn’t – at least by the standards of the *pramāṇavādins* – have a genuine perception of a cup. Keep in mind, also, that the negation in statement one is a *prasajya* or non-implicational propositional negation, so it remains the case that Jayarāṣi never affirms anything in the context of epistemology. In the context of everyday practice, however, Jayarāṣi very well might utter the sentence, “Devadatta sees a cup,” using “sees” in its everyday sense with no attempt at epistemological examination.

This comparison to the two-context aspect of semantic contextualism in epistemology helps to explain Jayarāṣi’s citation of the following saying in the introduction to the TUS: “Regarding worldly everyday practice, a fool and a philosopher (*paṇḍita*) are similar” (TUS 0.1).⁶³ In the everyday context, whether one is a fool or a sophisticated philosopher (*paṇḍita*) makes no difference and the text goes on to show that the theories of philosophers undermine themselves in a philosophical context.

⁶³ *lokavyavahāraṃ prati sadṛśau bālapaṇḍitau*. TUS 0.1. While this fragment may initially appear to be a Cārvāka maxim, some scholars argue that it is probably of Buddhist origin (Bhattacharya 2002, 620, Franco 1994, 43).

The best reason to read Jayarāśi as embodying a kind of contextualism is that this would help him respond to the age-old objection that skepticism is inconsistent or self-refuting, which is one of the most common objections raised against philosophers such as Sextus, Nāgārjuna, and Jayarāśi.⁶⁴ John Koller states the charge against Jayarāśi quite clearly: “The skeptic’s paradox is this: If he does not know that the evidence for knowledge claims is inadequate, he has no reasons for his skepticism. But if he does know, then he clearly accepts (operationally, at least) a satisfiable criterion of adequate evidence, and, to this extent is not a skeptic” (Koller 1977, 158). It seems that Jayarāśi is in danger of falling into a trap in which either his conclusion is entirely irrational and should have no effect on us, or it is blatantly self-refuting such that the truth of the conclusion that no *pramāṇas* can be established implies its own falsity, since some means of knowledge must be established in order to show that no means of knowledge can be established. Can Jayarāśi avoid this trap?

I think Jayarāśi could answer to this charge, which was also leveled by classical Indian philosophers such as Vidyānanda and Bhāsarvajña.⁶⁵ First, Jayarāśi uses the *vitaṇḍā* style of argumentation, which is merely criticizing an opponent’s thesis without putting forward a counter-thesis. In the *Nyāyasūtra* *vitaṇḍā* is distinguished from friendly discussion (*vāda*) and disputation (*jalpa*). *Vitaṇḍā* is a subset of *jalpa*: “*Vitaṇḍā* is that [*jalpa*], which is without the establishing of a counter-position” (NS 1.2.3).⁶⁶ Jayarāśi is

⁶⁴ For discussion of how Pyrrhonists and Academic skeptics answered such charges, see Thorsrud 2009, 4-6, 80-83, 136-146.

⁶⁵ Vidyānanda’s critique occurs in his *Pramāṇaparīkṣa* (Franco 1994, 33). Franco discusses Bhāsarvajña’s critique in the *Nyāyabhūṣaṇa* in some detail (Franco 1994, 553-581).

⁶⁶ *sa pratipakṣasthāpanāhīno vitaṇḍā*. NS 1.2.3. Vātsyāyana, in his *Nyāyabhāṣya*, claims that a *vaitaṇḍika* actually has a view, but simply does not put it forward as a thesis during the debate: “That very thing which is said and characterized as a negation of that other [view], *that* is the view of the *vaitaṇḍika*, but it is not the case that some thing, which is this thing to be proved (*sādhyā*), is established as a thesis (*pratijñā*)” (*yad vai khalu tatparapratīṣedhalakṣaṇaṃ vākyam sa vaitaṇḍikasya pakṣaḥ, na tv asau kiñcid arthaṃ*)

a *vaitaṇḍika* revealing the groundlessness of his opponents' theses without positing a claim of his own; thus, there is no self-refutation, because Jayarāśi does not enter a positive claim in the epistemological context to contradict his negative claims in that context.⁶⁷

Secondly, both Western and Indian skeptics often have a way of using language that differs radically from the usual philosophical mode; for example, Sextus Empiricus claims to have no beliefs and Nāgārjuna purports to establish no thesis (*pratijñā*) (PH 1.7, VV 29). A common way to make sense of these seemingly nonsensical statements is to interpret the goal of Sextus and Nāgārjuna as a sort of therapy meant to induce a reaction in the reader.⁶⁸ Skeptics need not use language for the common philosophical purpose of establishing theses and supporting substantive beliefs; to hold skeptics to those standards constitutes a hermeneutic error. An argument is usually thought of as a set of statements meant to support another statement, which is the conclusion, and a statement is defined as a claim that something is either true or false. But skeptics are not proffering arguments in *that* sense, because they are not ultimately using statements put forward as truth-claims.

pratijñāya sthāpayattī. NBh 1.2.3). Uddyotakara, in his *Nyāyavārttika*, doesn't necessarily think the *vaitaṇḍika* has a view on the subject of the debate, but he does think the *vaitaṇḍika* accepts at least four things: "In accepting the refutation, [the *vaitaṇḍika*] admits, (1) the view to be refuted, (2) that he considers the view to be incorrect, (3) that there is a propounder [of the other view], and (4) that there is an asserter (i.e., himself)" (*dūṣaṇam abhyupagacchan dūṣyam abhyupaīti ayathārthāvabodham pratipadyate pratipādayitāraṃ pratipattāraṃ ca*. NV 1.2.3). For more on the history of the early Nyāya attempts to formulate a theory of debate and the motivations for doing so, see Preisendanz 2000.

⁶⁷ Jayarāśi also avoids a problem Stanley Cavell raises about external world skepticism. According to Cavell, skeptical arguments about the external world do not mean what they are purported to mean, because epistemologists put forward a claim in "a non-claim context," that is, a claim that nobody knows anything about the external world is not properly a claim at all, since such a claim "must be the investigation of a concrete claim if its procedure is to be coherent; it cannot be the investigation of a concrete claim if its conclusion is to be general" (Cavell 1979, 218-220). For Jayarāśi and other metaphysical skeptics the claim that they are not making a claim is not a problem as it would be for epistemological skepticism. Rather, the fact that they are not making a positive claim is itself the *point* of such skepticism.

⁶⁸ As mentioned earlier, Michael Williams sees Sextus's Pyrrhonism as entirely practical. Adrian Kuzminski gives a similar interpretation of both Pyrrhonism and Madhyamaka: "Far from seeing self-contradiction as a defining mark of incoherence and nonsense, or as some kind of mysterious referent, Pyrrhonism and the Madhyamaka use contradictions of this sort as performative acts..." (Kuzminski 2008, 64).

While it may appear that they are using standard philosophical arguments, they are in fact doing something quite different, because the goal is not to support a conclusion, but rather to stop trying to support philosophical conclusions all together.⁶⁹ In both Indian and Western philosophy, the charge of self-refutation “is mainly due to a misunderstanding of the sceptic’s use of language and his frame of mind” (Franco 1994, 37).⁷⁰ This answer to the charge of self-refutation explains how Jayarāṣi could say anything about philosophical topics in a philosophical context given his attitude of metaphilosophical skepticism. He is free to use language to make arguments in a philosophical context without thereby committing himself to acceptance of any counter-thesis or opposing theory.⁷¹ Furthermore, a form of contextualism might explain how he might use epistemic language in a regular context without contradicting his vehement rejection of epistemic concepts in the context of epistemology.

Here one might object that there is a contradiction in my interpretation. Versions of contextualism, whatever else they may be, seem to be epistemological theories.

⁶⁹ One might wonder whether such skeptics accept logic even if they do not accept philosophical theories. I see two possible answers, at least in Jayarāṣi’s case. First, one might think Jayarāṣi must accept basic logical principles (at least the Principle of Non-Contradiction), since a *prasāṅga* argument only works by revealing a contradiction and then rejecting the idea that engendered this contradiction. Jayarāṣi rejects epistemology precisely because it leads to contradictions. On the other hand, it may be that Jayarāṣi points out contradictions merely because his opponents think contradictions are to be avoided while he himself has no real opinion on the matter. He may even accept contradictions in non-philosophical contexts, all the while lampooning philosophers who think they can construct theories free from contradiction.

⁷⁰ There is a similar mistake in the interpretation of Pyrrhonism, 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).

⁷¹ Whether Jayarāṣi uses language in this skeptical, uncommitted way in everyday contexts is difficult to determine. He may well use language in a straightforward way as long as he’s not doing philosophy, or alternatively, he may appear to use language in a normal way in everyday contexts by saying the same things as everyone else, but in fact have a radically different attitude toward the things he says. The question is: does Jayarāṣi really believe what he says even in non-philosophical contexts? This is similar to the debate between “rustic” or “no belief” interpretation and the “urbane” or “some belief” interpretation of Pyrrhonism (Burnyeat and Frede 1997, Thorsrud 2009, 173-182). I am not sure how to answer this question and it may prove especially difficult, since we have even less evidence with which to answer this question about Jayarāṣi than we do about Pyrrhonism!

Hence, I have attributed a contextualist epistemological theory to Jayarāṣi while simultaneously denying that he accepts any epistemological theory. Far from saving Jayarāṣi from self-refutation, the contextualist move may seem to *deepen* the problem.

The problem with this objection is that it assumes I am claiming that Jayarāṣi actually accepts a contextualist theory of knowledge, as contemporary proponents of semantic contextualism clearly do and as Westerhoff claims Nāgārjuna does. But I have not claimed that Jayarāṣi accepts any version of contextualism. I am not claiming that he endorses any semantic theory about epistemic terms; in fact, he might even reject such a claim much as he rejects other epistemological claims.⁷² Specifically, my claim is that a two-tiered sort of contextualism can help us make sense of Jayarāṣi's philosophical practice. We can see him as *embodying* a sort of contextualism rather than arguing for it: in epistemological contexts, he accepts nothing (not even contextualism), but in regular contexts, he may accept some everyday knowledge claims.

Toward this end, Jayarāṣi may have been inspired by certain elements in the larger Cārvāka tradition. According to Mādhava's *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, it was the standard Cārvāka opinion that activity in the world does not rest on philosophically established inferences (SDS, p. 4). According to Purandara-type Cārvākas everyday practice requires only a type of inference that is "well-established in the world"

⁷² Jayarāṣi might find particular delight in a recent criticism by Elke Brendel, who exploits a self-referential peculiarity of contextualism somewhat like Jayarāṣi exploits an issue of self-reference for Dignāga in the Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument. Brendel argues that contextualism faces a serious problem in that "there is no context in which the contextualist can claim to know that her theory is true" (Brendel 2005, 38). Brendel's rigorous *reductio* arguments are too detailed to reproduce here, but her conclusion is that the main theses of contextualism (at least as she sees them), when combined with other plausible theses about knowledge, generate the contradiction that a contextualist both knows and does not know that contextualism is true in the same context (Brendel 2005, 47-51).

(*lokaprasiddham*), but does not require the use of trans-empirical inferences.⁷³ Another intriguing idea that Jayanta's *Nyāyamañjarī* attributes to the "well-educated Cārvākas" (*suśikṣitacārvāka*) is the view that "the determination of the number of *pramāṇas* is not possible."⁷⁴ Assuming these texts give even remotely accurate accounts of ideas that had been prevalent among some Cārvākas, the notion that one can act in the world in the absence of certain kinds of philosophically-established beliefs was probably familiar to Jayarāśi as was the idea that the epistemological task of determining the number and nature of *pramāṇas* may be impossible. Jayarāśi simply pushes these ideas further to eliminate philosophically established perceptions and, indeed, philosophical justifications of any kind.

4.8 How to be a Cārvāka skeptic, or, how to stop worrying and love a life without philosophy or religion

Jayarāśi's metaphilosophical skepticism brings two ideas together: the denial of epistemological realism and a kind of contextualism that makes room to enjoy everyday practice. We can see Jayarāśi not as denying that anyone really knows anything, but as inviting us to stop worrying about whether anyone really knows anything. Therefore, Jayarāśi expands Cārvāka irreligiousness to a suspicion about the possibility of epistemological theory in general, which in his day was intimately connected with purveyors of religious worldviews. We can see how his skepticism serves his Cārvāka sympathies; as Franco puts it, "in spite of the enormous differences in ontology and

⁷³ *purandaras tvāḥ* - "*lokaprasiddham anumānam cārvākair apīṣyata eva, yattu kaiścl laukikaṃ mārgam atikramyānumānam ucyate tanniśidhyate*" (Bhattacharya 2002, 608). Note: Bhattacharya quotes this from Kamaśīla's *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā*.

⁷⁴ *aśakya eva pramāṇasaṅkhyāniyama iti suśikṣitacārvākāḥ*. (Bhattacharya 2002, 609). Note: Bhattacharya quotes this from Jayanta's *Nyāyamañjarī*.

theory of knowledge, in ethical matters and in anti-clerical attitude, which formed the hard core of the Lokāyata, Jayarāśi remained a true heir of Bṛhaspati” (Franco 1994, 47).

Is Jayarāśi’s therapy meant for intellectuals with certain training or for anyone with philosophical impulses?⁷⁵ Jayarāśi’s contextualist point is that in regular, everyday life we simply don’t need philosophy to get along, and once you start doing philosophy, it subverts itself (but perhaps you need a good skeptic to demonstrate this). Although those with training in the schools of classical Indian philosophy are the specific targets of Jayarāśi’s destruction, Jayarāśi-style *prasaṅga* arguments could be raised against any theory with philosophical pretensions. However, I think Jayarāśi’s immediate targets are scholastic, professional philosophers and anyone who uses their efforts to support a religious worldview. This fits well with his Cārvāka tendencies and is entirely in line with what I take to be the true criterion for Cārvāka membership, namely, that he sees his work as contributing the pursuit of an irreligious way of life.

A Jayarāśian life would not be simply anti-intellectual, for, at least in his moods captured in the TUS, Jayarāśi displays a keen philosophical intellect and familiarity with the sophisticated epistemological theories of his day. Yet he does quote the fragment mentioned earlier: “Regarding worldly everyday practice, a fool and a philosopher are similar” (TUS 0.1). Might this indicate that a fool and a philosopher really are the same?

Philosophers who begin in the earnest search for philosophical insight may be initially troubled by their inability to establish philosophical theories. Following

⁷⁵ There is a similar question about Nāgārjuna. It seems to me that the direct targets of Nāgārjunian therapy are certain bits of scholastic theory, although such bits are built on a common human impulse: the desire to “get things right” in some substantial sense and the tendency to cling to these theories once they are formulated. Jayarāśi has a similar outlook, although his is not tied to specific Buddhist attitudes toward desire and clinging. Tom Tillemans considers a similar question of whether the idea of *svabhāva* is a purely academic abstraction or something inherent in people’s ordinary thinking (Tillemans 2007, 520-523).

Jayarāśi's destruction to its end may lead one to develop a particular attitude toward philosophical speculation. It would be self-contradictory to say (in a philosophical context) that one knows that philosophical theorizing is a hopeless task, but it may be that going through the rapturous route of Jayarāśian destruction leaves one without a taste for philosophical theory building or any impulse to indulge in such activity. Why *build* theories when *destroying* them is so much fun? But I don't think Jayarāśi's destructive tendencies are all fun and games. He raises a serious question about whether philosophy leads to a good life. Through his delightful destruction, he shows us how to stop worrying about philosophy and love a life without it. And this attitude can only be fully appreciated after going through the purgative therapy, just as one can only fully appreciate the paradoxicality of a paradox by trying to solve it. Metaphilosophical skepticism is, strangely enough, an attitude only fully available to philosophers (or at least recovering philosophers). This full appreciation is one sense in which a metaphilosophical skeptic would be different than a person who simply never considers philosophical problems. The fool and the Jayarāśian philosopher are slightly different after all, albeit not in knowledge or wisdom, but in the timbres of their attitudes. To say that Jayarāśian skeptics "realize" or "know" that philosophical contexts are bankrupt misses the point. Jayarāśi points to a situation in which one can be happy by eschewing any attempt to "realize" or "know" things in a philosophically robust manner, by being content to enjoy life without the need for philosophical justification.

It is worth noting that Jayarāśi never explicitly refers to any sort of insight or illumination – mystical, philosophical, or otherwise. In the absence of such language, I think his statement, "all everyday practices are made delightful, because they are not

deliberated” (TUS 14.5), should be taken as purely descriptive. He is simply describing the state of mind that might follow his philosophical destruction, but he is not giving any normative argument in favor of his approach. While the gerundive form *ramaṇīya*, which I have translated as “delightful,” could be translated as “should be enjoyed” (which at least sounds somewhat normative in English) either translation is acceptable (Monier-Williams 1994, 868). In any case, in the absence of any explicit normative argument, a more descriptive nuance makes more sense in this context.

I find it helpful to compare Jayarāṣī to what some have claimed is the descriptive nature of Pyrrhonism. R. J. Hankinson describes Sextus’s attitude extremely well.

Sextus does not, at the basic level, offer an argument for a way of life, or try to convince us that it is the better one ... What he does is describe a condition, and a response to it. If you recognize the condition, then you may be helped by the response. If you don’t, well maybe you don’t really have it, or maybe you are simply indulging in denial – either way the Pyrrhonist cannot help you. And in particular to the person who says that he sees nothing attractive in the Pyrrhonian way of life, the Pyrrhonist has, appropriately, nothing whatsoever to say. (Hankinson 1995, 308)

Sextus describes the nature of his practice in some detail in Book One of the PH, but Jayarāṣī is far less explicit on this matter. Furthermore, I rather suspect Jayarāṣī would have some dismissive, mocking words for those who disagree with his way of life. However, I think it makes sense to emphasize the descriptive, as opposed to normative, nature of what we might call (for lack of a better term) Jayarāṣī’s positive program. Of course, it could be that Jayarāṣī has some sort of normative argument, but simply neglected to spell it out. It’s also possible that he thinks the demolition of his opponents’ views gives a normative argument in that it leaves readers with nowhere else to turn. But again, I would appeal to the generally negative character of the text. Having spent over 100 pages of densely-packed Sanskrit attempting to demolish every *pramāṇa* theory he

could think of, it's hard to see how Jayarāśi *could* give a positive, normative argument for a way of life – on what basis would such an argument rest? While it's possible he has some sort of method of illumination outside of the *pramāṇas*, he never explains it or hints at anything of the kind. For these reasons, I think Jayarāśi's statements about everyday life in the absence of epistemological theory should be read as purely descriptive statements given in the absence of any further epistemological justification.

All of this probably sounds pretty strange the majority of philosophers who see their task as offering reasons and arguments in favor of particular views. It sounds strange to me. However, it's worth considering that skeptics such as Sextus and Jayarāśi might be a good deal happier than those who stake their happiness on the coherent establishment of some philosophical or religious worldview. Jayarāśi describes a situation in which the refusal of religion, by way of destroying the epistemological theories used to establish religious doctrines, can lead to a happy life. Contrary to the contemporary notion of skepticism as a threatening cloud hanging on the horizon of our cognitive lives, Jayarāśi, much like his Pyrrhonian counterparts, demonstrates that a skeptical life just might be a life worth living.

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Jayarāśi should be read as a metaphilosophical skeptic. I also hope to have shown that the study of Cārvāka and skepticism can increase our understanding of classical Indian thought, in large part because some other philosophers felt the need to respond to Jayarāśi's skepticism. Jayarāśi is important in the classical Indian tradition, since he exemplifies Cārvāka and metaphilosophical

skepticism in a unique and fascinating way. By delving into Jayarāṣi's interaction with Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, I showed that Jayarāṣi argues in a *vitandā* style of pure criticism with no counter-thesis, and that Jayarāṣi's arguments are epistemological in the strange way that they deny that epistemology itself is possible. I then argued that my interpretation makes the best sense of the text and that it makes a contribution to our understanding of the TUS and its place in classical Indian philosophy. By comparison with the contemporary ideas of epistemological realism and contextualism, I put forward the suggestion that Jayarāṣi can be fruitfully interpreted as denying that epistemology is possible, but nonetheless allowing himself to engage in some contexts of viable epistemic activity. Lastly, I offered some suggestions about how my interpretation makes sense of Jayarāṣi as a Cārvāka skeptic.

One reason these aspects of Jayarāṣi's text have not been explored in detail may be that many interpreters implicitly assume epistemological realism. If epistemology maps on to natural structures of human knowledge, and Jayarāṣi denies epistemology, he must deny human knowledge in general. But it is worth considering why we should assume that the denial of epistemology would constitute the denial of everyday practice. Raising questions about epistemological realism and contextualism opens up the conceptual space to see that Jayarāṣi is a skeptic, but he is not a skeptic about knowledge as such – he is a skeptic about philosophy itself. Jayarāṣi offers a purely descriptive account of a way of life in which it is by eschewing philosophical inquiry that we can fully enjoy the world of human experience.

Of course, I can't be sure that this is what Jayarāṣi really meant; there is simply too little textual evidence about what he intends his labyrinthine *prasaṅgas* to

accomplish. However, I hope my view does offer a coherent, charitable interpretation of the text. In doing so, I hope to have shown how Jayarāśi inspires us to ask interesting questions about the place of skepticism in the classical Indian tradition in particular and in epistemology more generally. At the very least, I have been inspired by Jayarāśi to consider a unique kind of skepticism that offers much of interest for those of us who, like Jayarāśi, have naturalist and skeptical sympathies combined with a metaphilosophical suspicion that philosophy itself may offer far fewer answers than most philosophers suppose.

Having now discussed two forms of metaphilosophical skepticism in detail, both of which elicited concern from other philosophers, in the next and final chapter I will return to my original question, “is skepticism an inevitable problem?” I think the answer is yes, but it depends on what one means by “skepticism.” If the argument of chapter two is correct, external world skepticism does not seem to be an inevitable problem, at least not quite in the way in which it has driven Western epistemology in recent centuries. In the final chapter, I will argue that metaphilosophical skepticism does seem to be an inevitable problem in many philosophical traditions, and I will develop an explanation for what it is that has allowed metaphilosophical skepticism to arise in diverse historical and cultural contexts. I will also consider the question of whether some variety of metaphilosophical skepticism is worth accepting, and I will argue for a form of mitigated metaphilosophical skepticism.

Chapter Five

The Dependent Origination of Metaphilosophical Skepticism

“... once memes have appeared the pressure to keep thinking all the time is inevitable. With all this competition going on the main casualty is a peaceful mind.”

- Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*

“Thus, the limits of thought are boundaries which cannot be crossed, but yet which are crossed.”

- Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*

“Philosophical theses can sometimes be assented to, but often they can expect only to be taken seriously.”

- Colin McGinn, *Problems in Philosophy*

Having come to the last chapter, it's worth taking stock of what I have covered thus far. In chapter one, I discussed the debate about the intuitive thesis (the thesis that the problem of skepticism is an intuitive part of the human condition), and I set up an experiment in cross-cultural philosophy, suggesting that if the problem of skepticism is an inevitable part of the human condition, it should arise in a tradition as sophisticated as classical Indian philosophy. In chapter two I demonstrated that there are arguments based on dreams in Vasubandhu's *Viṃśikākārikā* that are similar to skeptical arguments from ignorance; however, even if a phenomenalist interpretation is correct, such arguments are not a precise analogue of the problem of external-world skepticism found in Western philosophy since Descartes. There is, however, another form of skepticism: metaphilosophical skepticism. In chapter three I argued that reading Madhyamaka philosophers such as Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti as metaphilosophical skeptics can solve the problem of how to reconcile their arguments for emptiness and commitment to

Buddhism with their injunctions against holding any view. In chapter four I argued that Jayarāśi, a skeptical member of the anti-religious Cārvāka school, ought to be read as a metaphilosophical skeptic in that he vigorously refutes any positive epistemological theory while embodying a contextualism that makes room to enjoy everyday practice. Although my focus in the previous two chapters was on the skeptics themselves, along the way I pointed out that the skeptical issues raised by Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi were matters of concern for non-skeptical philosophers, which demonstrates that metaphilosophical skepticism was an issue in classical Indian thought.

In this fifth and final chapter my goal is to develop an explanation for what it is about philosophical reflection that allows a concern about metaphilosophical skepticism to arise in the various times, places, and traditions in which it has arisen. To do so, I rely on the Buddhist idea of dependent origination, the basic form of which is expressed as follows: “When this exists, that comes to be ... When this does not exist, that does not come to be” (DN 38.19-22). My thesis in this chapter is that the development of the issue of metaphilosophical skepticism in diverse philosophical traditions can be explained by appealing to three contemporary ideas (memes, the Inclosure Schema, and cognitive closure) as well as the fact that there are some reasons in favor of metaphilosophical skepticism. My explanation uses ideas from contemporary work on memes by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Susan Blackmore, Graham Priest’s work on contradictions at the limits of thought, and Colin McGinn’s theory that the mysterious nature of philosophy is due to human cognitive limitations. The last part of my explanation is to argue that part of the explanation for the persistence of metaphilosophical skepticism as a philosophical issue is that metaphilosophical skepticism is *true*, at least in a mitigated

form for which I will argue. My argument for mitigated metaphilosophical skepticism consists of three stages: a pessimistic induction about philosophical progress, an argument for how we should react to the persistence of apparent philosophical contradictions, and reasons for nonetheless mitigating one's metaphilosophical skepticism. I end the chapter by revisiting the issue with which I began in chapter one, arguing that my work in the previous chapters ought to incite us to reframe the original debate on the intuitive thesis. The evidence I have collected in these chapters supports my overall thesis that the problem of external-world skepticism does not seem to be intuitive, but a concern about metaphilosophical skepticism is a cross-cultural phenomenon that is often a natural result of philosophical endeavors.

As readers can guess, this will be the most abstract and speculative of my chapters. It is also the most explicitly metaphilosophical.¹ As I will argue, among the lessons metaphilosophical skepticism teaches us is that we ought to have modesty about our philosophical abilities. I ask readers to give me the benefit of this sort of modesty about my claims here. My attitude toward my own conjectures in this chapter is similar to an attitude expressed by Hume at the end of Book One of the *Treatise of Human Nature*. Concerning the objection that his skepticism precludes him from making any philosophical claims or using phrases such as “’tis certain” or “’tis evident”, Hume ends Book One as follows:

¹ While work that explicitly deals with metaphilosophy is relatively rare these days, in addition to the work by Priest and McGinn I will consider in this chapter, some well-regarded philosophers have published recent works on metaphilosophy such as Nicholas Rescher (2006) and Timothy Williamson (2007). Williamson doesn't call his work “metaphilosophy” because he thinks this word “sounds as though it might try to look down on philosophy from above, or beyond” (Williamson 2007, *ix*). Instead, he calls it “the philosophy of philosophy,” by which he means it is the part of philosophy that investigates philosophy, just as the philosophy of science is the part of philosophy that investigates science. I agree with Williamson that metaphilosophy need not be above or beyond philosophy (one wonders, in fact, how it *could* be), but I think “metaphilosophy” is a perfectly reasonable word to describe the part of philosophy that is an inquiry into the nature, aims, methods, and value of philosophy, and I use it accordingly.

... I here enter a *caveat* against any objections, which may be offer'd on that head; and declare that such expressions were extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited idea of my own judgment, which are sentiments that I am sensible can become no body, and a sceptic still less than any other. (*Treatise* 1.4.7)

5.1 Metaphilosophical skepticism as a cross-cultural issue

I've discussed some examples of a concern about metaphilosophical skepticism in Western philosophy (section 2.8) and in Indian philosophy in considerably more detail (chapters three and four). If I'm right, this means that concerns about metaphilosophical skepticism have arisen in two distinct philosophical traditions as well as in several different historical periods (Hellenistic Europe, classical India, the modern West, etc.). Have there been concerns about metaphilosophical skepticism elsewhere?

I suggest that the classical Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi may represent some kind of metaphilosophical skepticism as well, which would make the concern about this type of skepticism a widely cross-cultural phenomenon. My main reason for this suggestion is that Zhuangzi makes many playful attacks on the types of language and conceptualization encouraged by philosophical activity. The following is one of my favorite passages to this effect:

The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him? (Chuang Tzu 1964, sec. 26)²

² I am using the Burton Watson translation (1964), which uses the Wade-Giles spelling, "Chuang Tzu" whereas I prefer the Pinyin spelling, "Zhuangzi."

Support for interpreting Zhuangzi as a metaphilosophical skeptic comes from Paul Kjellberg (1996) and James Peterman (2008).³ Kjellberg offers an illuminating comparison of Zhuangzi and Sextus, showing that Zhuangzi uses arguments that are similar to the Pyrrhonian modes of relativity, circularity, infinite regress, and hypothesis in order to create uncertainty in his readers (Kjellberg 1996, 9). Nonetheless, “while both Sextus and Zhuangzi administer skeptical arguments to induce uncertainty, they do so for different reasons: Sextus for the psychological good of *ataraxia* and Zhuangzi for the practical good of what we shall call ‘skillful living’” (Kjellberg 1996, 12-13). Furthermore, Kjellberg claims, “Uncertainty is valuable, for Zhuangzi, because it leaves people open-minded and attentive and thus enables them to live skillfully and well” (Kjellberg 1996, 16). While Peterman denies that Zhuangzi is a skeptic, he means that Zhuangzi does not deny knowledge claims in general as would a global epistemological skeptic.⁴ Peterman claims that Zhuangzi can be interpreted along Wittgensteinian therapeutic lines in which Zhuangzi’s text “scrupulously avoids and rejects making any philosophical claims” (Peterman 2008, 372). Also, Peterman attributes to Zhuangzi something similar to the skeptical use of language I discussed in the previous chapter (section 4.7). On Peterman’s view, Zhuangzi makes a distinction between “flexible, contextual” language and “non-flexible, non-contextual” language (Peterman 2008, 379). It is beyond my expertise to develop a detailed skeptical interpretation of Zhuangzi and his non-skeptical opponents, including many Confucians and non-skeptical Chinese

³ For more on Zhuangzi and skepticism, see also chapters two through four of Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996.

⁴ For instance, the famous butterfly dream in section two might seem to be an expression of epistemological skepticism insofar as it says, “But he didn’t know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.” However, it is more likely that this is meant to demonstrate what Zhuangzi calls “the Transformation of Things.” As Kjellberg notes, “His worry about knowledge is not that it is radically illusory so much as that it is partial and incomplete” (Kjellberg 1996, 13).

Buddhist philosophers; however, I would suggest that pursuing such interpretations might be a profitable line of inquiry for scholars of Chinese philosophy.⁵

As a general category, metaphilosophical skepticism illuminates a skeptical theme that is different than the problems engendered by forms of epistemological skepticism. Furthermore, this category can point to this similarity without forcing us to erase the differences among the members of this group. Some philosophers have had the tendency to see the main split in philosophical skepticism as one between Cartesian and Pyrrhonian skepticism, but there are forms of skepticism that are neither Cartesian nor Pyrrhonian. This is why so many comparisons between skeptical-seeming philosophers and Pyrrhonism remain incomplete. For instance, Robert Fogelin (1994) argues that Wittgenstein has Pyrrhonian elements in his suspicions about his earlier *Tractatus* and philosophy in general, particularly the drive toward essences and “superconcepts” as ultimate justifications.⁶ Hans Sluga criticizes Fogelin’s interpretation by pointing out that Wittgenstein’s “form of thinking is neither Pyrrhonian nor non-Pyrrhonian but rather a type of philosophizing and – and, indeed, a type of skepticism – all of its own” (Sluga 2004, 115).⁷ While Wittgenstein may not be a pure Pyrrhonian skeptic, he does have tendencies toward metaphilosophical skepticism.

⁵ It might be thought that Zhuangzi is, rather than a skeptic, a sort of mystic. As Kjellberg says, “in spite of Zhuangzi’s skepticism concerning linguistic or ‘rational’ knowledge, he has absolute faith in intuitive or ‘natural’ knowledge” (Kjellberg 1996, 15). However, I think this is still quite in line with metaphilosophical skepticism since Zhuangzi is using philosophical arguments to undermine philosophy; furthermore, it seems to me that this “natural knowledge” is more of a way of acting in the world than anything resembling the kind of mystical insight discussed by mystics such as al-Ghazali.

⁶ Fogelin sees a struggle between “two Wittgensteins”: in addition to a “neo-Pyrrhonist” trend, there is a non-Pyrrhonist trend wherein Wittgenstein’s notions of holism, publicity, and action become superconcepts in themselves doing the work previously done by other philosophical concepts (Fogelin 1994, 205-222). I think one way out of this struggle is to claim that Wittgenstein uses such concepts purely therapeutically.

⁷ According to Sluga, Fogelin and other interpreters such as Cora Diamond also “fail to appreciate a distinctive characteristic of Wittgenstein’s philosophizing: his willingness to move back and forth between different and opposing ideas” (Sluga 2004, 114).

Adrian Kuzminski's comparison between Pyrrhonism and Nāgārjuna, while worthwhile, ignores important differences (Kuzminski 2007, 2008). Whereas Sextus uses Pyrrhonian arguments in a piecemeal, dialectical fashion as a means to suspension of judgment, on my interpretation, Nāgārjuna's philosophical procedure has two general phases: the first phase is that of offering arguments for emptiness and against essences (*svabhāva*) and the second phase is that of demonstrating that this idea of emptiness has the peculiar property of undermining not only all other philosophical views, but even itself. While Nāgārjuna's approach is to purge us of the tendency to grasp at any philosophical option available, Sextus means to support two competing options equally in order to suspend judgment. Nāgārjuna is not a Pyrrhonian *per se*, but he is a metaphilosophical skeptic.

Metaphilosophical skepticism is a broad enough umbrella term to encompass such differences while pointing to an interesting similarity. Sextus, Wittgenstein, Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, Zhuangzi, and other philosophers can be categorized as metaphilosophical skeptics, since they all share a common suspicion about philosophical goals in general, but we don't need use one particular figure, whether that be Sextus, Zhuangzi, Jayarāsi, etc., as the standard by which to measure the others. For these reasons, I think it's more profitable to create a new larger category under which to subsume these diverse figures and the concerns they raise rather than seeking to subsume everything under previously existing categories with specific historical associations. And when we notice this larger category, we find that concern about metaphilosophical skepticism is a widely cross-cultural phenomenon.

5.2 Memes and metaphilosophy

If I am right that concerns about metaphilosophical skepticism have arisen in diverse philosophical contexts, then it's sensible to ask what conditions make concerns about metaphilosophical skepticism possible. In asking this question, I'm thinking of the Buddhist idea of dependent origination. Although there is a more specific, twelve-step version of dependent origination, which is a psychological analysis of the arising of suffering⁸, my concern here is with the more general characterization. My idea is that whenever the conditions are right, whenever a philosophical tradition attempts to ground its claims in some robust theory of justification, there will arise – almost inevitably – a number of individuals who question this very process, who have deep, persisting doubts about the philosophical enterprise itself; furthermore, this raises an issue that their non-skeptical counterparts often feel the need to address. I call this the dependent origination of the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism. Supposing there are similar conditions that give rise to concerns about metaphilosophical skepticism within various philosophical traditions, I am curious as to what those conditions might be. Understanding these conditions might give us a sense of whether the issue of metaphilosophical skepticism is a natural part of the human condition or whether it arises from theoretically avoidable conditions.

⁸ A typical twelve-step formulation is as follows: “With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, existence; with existence as condition, birth; with birth as condition, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering” (SN 12.1). For a good introduction to the history and interpretation of dependent origination, see Gethin 1998, 149-159.

I should make it clear that I am in no way saying that either metaphilosophical skeptics themselves or their opponents were consciously aware of these conditions or that they would care to give a theoretical picture of these conditions. In the next few sections, I am stepping out of my role as philosophical interpreter (my primary role in chapters two through four) and into a role of an independent philosopher. I am developing what is simultaneously an explanatory thesis about the history of philosophy and a metaphilosophical picture of the human condition.

While it is possible that the issue of metaphilosophical skepticism has arisen due to anything from direct historical influence to something more abstract in human nature, I favor what is – as far as I am aware – a novel approach to such questions. I propose to use the idea of memes, which was originally developed by biologist Richard Dawkins. I have three reasons for borrowing this idea from the sciences.⁹ First, theses of direct historical transmission of skeptical ideas (e.g., Flintoff 1980, McEvilley 2002, Chs. 17-18) are based on scant historical evidence; it would be better to suspend judgment on questions such as whether Greek and Indian philosophers were in direct contact and instead to develop other possible explanations. Furthermore, explanations involving direct historical contact don't explain skeptical issues in other traditions, such as the Chinese tradition. Second, theories based on similarities in human nature (e.g., Stroud 1984) are too tenuous and abstract to give much of an explanation at all. The same problem arises when people make the claim that propensities toward violence are due to human nature. Such claims may be true, but they're not very informative until further

⁹ A more general reason to favor a meme-based approach is that it serves as a corrective to an excessively individualistic picture of philosophy. Rather than thinking of the history of philosophy as a series of individual geniuses reacting explicitly to the work of other individual geniuses, a meme-based approach stresses the role of social interaction and features of the ideas themselves (or at least our human cognitive ability to understand these ideas).

details are given.¹⁰ Third, a meme-based approach, combined with some important recent work in metaphilosophy, is able to give a more detailed explanation of how metaphilosophical skepticism arises. A meme-based approach can tell us three things: how similar ideas arise in multiple traditions without positing direct historical influence, how metaphilosophical skepticism arises out of philosophical activity, and why metaphilosophical skepticism, while persistent, is endorsed by relatively few individuals even if it's an issue many philosophers consider. As will become clear, I do think that the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism is related to the human condition, but unlike Stroud's rather incomplete account with regard to epistemological skepticism, I give a more detailed explanation of how the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism arises.

These days the word "meme" is most often used to refer to internet memes such as pictures of cats with amusing captions (i.e., "LOL cats"), but the word has an earlier and wider application. Richard Dawkins introduced the word "meme" in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. He speculates that there may be, aside from the biological replicator of the gene, a cultural replicator that accounts for cultural transmission and evolution.

We need a name for this new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene.' I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream.'

(Dawkins 2006, 192)

Dawkins gives several examples of memes including "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches." Memes are analogous with genes: "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via

¹⁰ I've always found it strange that an appeal to human nature often has the rhetorical effect of ending further inquiry on some subject – as if vague hand-waving toward human nature answers all questions!

sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (Dawkins 2006, 192).

Building on a suggestion from Dawkins, Susan Blackmore argues that memes fit the three criteria of a successful replicator: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. This means that “a good replicator must be copied accurately, many copies must be made, and the copies must last a long time” (Blackmore 1999, 100). Although many aspects of her work are controversial, Blackmore gives an account of memes that may be helpful for thinking about philosophical activities.

Before I turn to the specific prospects for a memetic understanding of philosophy, it’s worth considering some potential problems with the idea of memes. One issue is that it can be difficult to specify the unit of a meme, which some critics argue casts doubt on the whole memetic enterprise. A favorite example here is the question of whether the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (*da, da, da, dum...*) constitute a distinct meme from the whole symphony (e.g., Blackmore 1999, 53, Dennett 1995, 344). Blackmore notes that specifying the unit of a gene is also difficult, and this does not preclude the success of genetics. She suggests that a precise answer to this objection is unnecessary: anything that can be copied fitting the three criteria of replicator will do. As she puts it,

A single word is too short to copyright and an entire library too long, but we can and do copyright anything from a clever advertising jingle to a 100 000 word book. Any of these can count as memes – there is no right answer to the question – ‘What *really* is the unit of the meme.’ (Blackmore 1999, 54)

Another problem for memetics is that the copying mechanism is not well understood, at any rate not nearly as well understood as DNA in the case of genes. Daniel Dennett, another champion of memetics, draws an analogy between those who wonder whether memes really exist and those who wonder whether words really exist: “What is the word ‘cat’ made of? Words are recognizable, reidentifiable products of human activity; they come in many media, and can leap from substrate to substrate in the process of being replicated ... The word ‘cat’ isn’t made out of some of the ink on this page...” (Dennett 2006, 351). For memes, as for words, “their standing as real things is not in the slightest impugned by their abstractness” (Dennett 2006, 351).¹¹

While I can’t quell all objections to memetics here, I can enter the caveat that readers who are ontologically troubled by the very idea of a meme are free to take my use of the concept as a mere explanatory heuristic. I’m not terribly concerned to commit myself to any particular position on the ontological status of memes, but I do find the idea to have explanatory value.

Dawkins has applied memes to scientific activities: “If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself from brain to brain” (Dawkins 2006, 192). If memes can be applied to science, why not philosophy? While Dennett’s disciplinary home is philosophy (opposed to Dawkins’s in biology and Blackmore’s in psychology), as far as I know neither he nor anyone else explicitly applies memes to the activity of philosophy.

¹¹ Blackmore makes the further point that, although the copying mechanism of memes is not precisely understood at this time, Darwinism was on the road to being a successful theory long before DNA was discovered; for the time being, a better understanding of imitation is a good place to start for memetics (Blackmore 1999, 56-58) Blackmore and Dennett also point out that a lot of trouble is created by taking the analogy between genes and memes too strictly; they are, after all, different replicators, each with its own distinctive features (Blackmore 1999, 62, Dennett 2006, 353).

A memetic understanding of philosophical activity allows us to take things like definitions, arguments, problems, quotations, and ideas as memes that can be replicated from one philosopher's brain to another. Areas of philosophy such as epistemology or schools of philosophy such as Nyāya might constitute "memeplexes" – "groups of memes that come together for mutual advantage" (Blackmore 1999, 231).¹² In applying memetics to philosophy, it's worth noting, "In thinking about thinking we should remember that not all thoughts are memes" (Blackmore 1999, 15). It is only the philosophical activities that are made public that are capable of being passed on as memes; however, the fact that many of our thoughts can and do become memes may account for the constant stream of thoughts most of us experience as a competition among prospective memes. Hence, it may be memetic competition that creates the mental disturbance that many metaphilosophical skeptics seek to overcome: "With all this competition going on the main causality is a peaceful mind" (Blackmore 1999, 42). Having given a brief sketch of a memetic picture of philosophical activity, let me turn to three specific advantages that a meme-based approach has for my project in this chapter.

The first advantage is that it can explain how a similar problem – metaphilosophical skepticism – can arise in multiple traditions, even without direct contact between philosophers.¹³ In what is known as convergent evolution similar

¹² Religious traditions are the most typical examples of memeplexes (Dawkins 2006, 197-198, Blackmore 1999, Ch. 15, Dennett 2006).

¹³ In chapter two (section 2.8) I said that metaphilosophical skepticism (at least the radical kind) is an attitude. Can an attitude be a meme? The *idea* to have a certain attitude certainly can be (I can get the idea to be cool from watching a James Dean movie), but attitudes themselves are probably memeplexes consisting of memes for various behaviors and beliefs. In the case of those who entertain metaphilosophical skepticism as a problem without endorsing it one might think of the problem as a set of ideas, arguments, and attitudes. To minimize these complications, in this section I talk about a concern about metaphilosophical skepticism as an idea or a problem, rather than an attitude or a set of ideas, arguments, and attitudes, but I mean that it's an idea that having a skeptical attitude toward philosophy is beneficial in some way or the idea that one should reject this attitude.

biological adaptations evolve independently given similar environmental pressures. Likewise, similar philosophical problems can arise independently given similar memetic environments. A famous case of convergent evolution is that the eye has evolved in several different phylogentic branches of life that are not directly related by common descent, at least not for many millions of years – all life is related if you go back far enough! Eyes are useful for organisms in a variety of environments; they are what Dennett calls a “Good Trick” (Dennett 1995, 77). Likewise, given the pressures of similar memetic environments, similar memes can arise even without direct memetic descent, i.e., without direct learning or imitation from other individuals. We may not want to say that such similar memes are strictly the *same* meme¹⁴, but they are nonetheless similar memes just as the genes for squid eyes and those for human eyes are different genes although they produce similar biological structures.

The second advantage of a memetic view of philosophy is that it allows us to sketch a description of how the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism arises from environments of philosophical memes and memeplexes. The specific type of meme that often (although not always) gives rise to the issue of metaphilosophical skepticism is one I would call an ultimate justification meme. This sort of meme arises from memeplexes

¹⁴ Dennett claims, “... we do not want to consider two *identical* cultural items as instances of the same *meme* unless they are related by descent. (The genes for octopus eyes are not the same genes as those for dolphin eyes, however similar they may appear.) This is apt to create a host of illusions, or just undecidability, for cultural evolutionists wherever they attempt to trace the memes for Good Tricks. The more abstract the level at which we identify the memes, the harder it is to tell convergent evolution from descent” (Dennett 1995, 356). Dennett’s point is a good epistemic caution with regard to how precise our knowledge of memes could be, although he remains confident that memetics can still be useful despite its relative inexactness. Blackmore is more optimistic about the prospects for more exact memetics in the future (Blackmore 1999, 58). Dennett is less optimistic: “... even if memes *do* originate by a process of ‘descent with modification,’ our chances of cranking out a science that charts that descent are slim” (Dennett 1995, 356). I don’t need to take a stand on this issue here (I’m just trying to sketch a meme-based picture to make sense of metaphilosophical skepticism), but a future elaboration of a memetic metaphilosophy would do well to look into this and other issues more closely.

in which issues of justification (or some other knowledge-certifying property¹⁵) take center stage. This happened in ancient Greece, classical India, and elsewhere when philosophers turned from making creative – yet largely baseless – speculations on the nature of reality to a concern with how it is that we know what we think we know. While this concern often became explicitly epistemological (e.g., Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Gautama’s *Nyāyasūtra*, etc.), I’m referring more to a general concern for reasons, argument, and evidence used as justifications for one’s views. Once this general concern is in place, it’s only a matter of time before philosophers wonder what justification(s) could possibly justify their justifiers: hence, an ultimate justification is sought due to a natural memetic progression from philosophical justification memes to ultimate justification memes. Specific examples of ultimate justification memes are everything from Plato’s Form of the Good to Dignāga’s appeal to perception and inference.¹⁶ Once ultimate justification memes are on the scene there are often some philosophers who notice inherent flaws in the idea of an ultimate justification (what those flaws might be will be discussed in the next section); they then use the sorts of arguments found in philosophical memeplexes against the idea of philosophy itself and defenders of philosophy attempt to refute these doubts. Hence, the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism arises.

I’m not saying these steps will always follow in lock-step progression, as if this were some sort of hard determinism in the intellectual realm. My point is that these are *necessary* conditions for the arising of metaphilosophical skepticism in a philosophical

¹⁵ Examples of other possible knowledge-certifying properties include having the right causal conditions (as in Nyāya epistemology – see Phillips 2012 – and Goldman 1985) or that beliefs “track the truth” (as in Nozick 1981, Ch. 3).

¹⁶ Anti-realists and anti-foundationalists might claim that my account is unnecessarily realist or foundationalist in character. I’ll say more about this in section 5.6, but my basic reply is that ultimate justification memes still come up when one wonders what justifies anti-realism or anti-foundationalism – ultimate justification memes are harder to avoid than many contemporary philosophers realize!

tradition. They are not, however, *sufficient* conditions.¹⁷ There are far more conditions present in any philosophical tradition than I could hope to theorize here, but my hypothesis is that the memetic progression I have just sketched is the general structure in which the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism arises. In the next few sections, I'll add some details to this account.

Before doing so, however, let me discuss a third advantage of a memetic metaphilosophy: it can explain why it is that metaphilosophical skepticism is so persistent yet never popularly endorsed in any given philosophical tradition. This explanation begins with one of Blackmore's more controversial forays into memetics. She argues that the self is merely a memplex:

The self is a vast memplex – perhaps the most insidious and pervasive memplex of them all. I shall call it the 'selfplex.' The selfplex permeates all our experience and all our thinking so that we are unable to see it clearly for what it is – a bunch of memes. (Blackmore 1999, 231)

She notes that her theory resonates with Humean and Buddhist views of the self (Blackmore 1999, 226, 230-231). For my purposes here I'm interested in Blackmore's assertion that her theory "suggests that memes can gain an advantage by becoming associated with a person's self concept. ... Ideas that can be inside a self – that is, become 'my' ideas, or 'my' opinions, are winners" (Blackmore 1999, 232). If Blackmore is right about this, then metaphilosophical skepticism will tend to remain unpopular. People who engage in philosophy often do so because they perceive that reaching goals of philosophy – whatever they take those to be – is possible and desirable.

¹⁷ I'm not claiming that there are no sufficient conditions. I just don't know what all of those conditions are. But there probably are such conditions, including everything from individuals with a particular intellectual temperament being in the right place at the right time to the presence of some motivation for eschewing philosophy – tranquility, unattachment, an irreligious way of life, etc. While this is still some form of intellectual determinism, I don't find determinism any scarier in an intellectual context than in a moral one.

Hence, this idea becomes associated with the self-concepts of philosophers. *I* spend time on an activity that has value to *me*. From this it follows that the kinds of doubts about the possibility or desirability of philosophy found in metaphilosophical skepticism would – for most philosophers anyway – serve to undermine their self concepts. Therefore, memes for metaphilosophical skepticism will replicate less frequently among philosophers than memes that imbue philosophy with some importance. Think of the success of the idea of Plato’s Philosopher who communes with the ultimately real forms or the soteriological gains many Indian philosophers allege will be yours if you study their system. This isn’t to say that more modest philosophical self images, such as Locke’s underlaborer, don’t also get passed on; it’s not even to say that metaphilosophical skeptics couldn’t identify with their skepticism – Jayarāsi might, for instance, firmly identify with his role as philosophical demolition expert. My point is that the fact that metaphilosophical skepticism tends to undermine the self concepts of many philosophers accounts for the fact that it is seldom endorsed.

Furthermore, Blackmore’s theory augments my argument that Nāgārjuna had Buddhist motivations for his skepticism. As Blackmore says, “An interesting consequence of all this is that beliefs, opinions, possessions and personal preferences all bolster the idea that there is a believer or owner behind them” (Blackmore 1999, 233). One way to lessen one’s attachment to an illusory self concept is to reduce one’s beliefs and opinions. As I see it this is just what Nāgārjuna was trying to do.

If metaphilosophical skepticism is so seldom endorsed, how is it so persistent as a cross-cultural problem? While memes can be passed on for many reasons – appealing to the self concept, being catchy, being easy to remember, etc. – some memes are passed on

because they are true (Blackmore 1999, 180), or at any rate some memes seem to actually have good reasons in their favor. My hypothesis is that there are actually some good reasons in favor of metaphilosophical skepticism. Some philosophers in the last few thousand years have noticed these reasons, although the uses to which they have put these discoveries have varied. In the next two sections, I will explain what I think the underlying discovery of metaphilosophical skeptics might be, and in section 5.5 I will argue that there are good reasons to accept a mitigated form of metaphilosophical skepticism.

5.3 Philosophy, contradictions, and the limits of thought

Even if I am wrong in reading Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi as metaphilosophical skeptics, the crucial role of contradiction in concerns about metaphilosophical skepticism is undeniable. Demonstrating contradictions in opponents' views is the key to the whole *prasaṅga* method. Sextus's use of contradiction is not always as clear it is for his Indian counterparts, but the method of *isosthenia*, or finding equally convincing arguments both for and against a position, shows that contradiction also underlies Pyrrhonian methods. While uncovering contradictions is not the only strategy in a metaphilosophical skeptic's bag of tricks, it is one of the most effective.¹⁸

In this section I will consider the work of Graham Priest, a contemporary philosopher who has thought deeply about contradictions and their place in philosophical

¹⁸ Mitigated metaphilosophical skeptics such as Hume and Dignāga, for instance, tend to use epistemological arguments instead of demonstrating conceptual contradictions. As a therapeutic philosopher, Wittgenstein often uses our ordinary understanding as therapy for avoiding philosophy. However, I think the fact of contradiction probably underlies most methods of metaphilosophical skepticism even if it is not as directly obvious as it is in the *prasaṅga* method. For example, the fact that we don't or can't know what some philosophers claim we do is a kind of contradiction, and therapeutic skepticism invites us to return to everyday practice, where contradictions don't arise (although they could once we turn philosophical).

thinking. His book *Beyond the Limits of Thought* is a dialethic adventure in the history of Western philosophy (with one stop in Indian philosophy in the second edition with the help of Jay Garfield). Priest presents this history as evidence for a logical theory known as dialetheism, “the view that there are true contradictions” (Priest 2002, 4). After looking at what Priest calls the Inclosure Schema, a schema for generating contradictions, I’ll show how Priest and Garfield apply it to Nāgārjuna’s work, and I will show how I think it applies to one of Jayarāsi’s arguments. As I’ll argue, I don’t agree with Priest that dialetheism is the best explanation for the historical persistence of apparent philosophical contradictions, but I do think that his Inclosure Schema captures the structure of the problems that so many metaphilosophical skeptics have exploited for their various purposes over the centuries.

Priest claims that there are philosophical contradictions to be found in Aristotle, Sextus, modern set theory, Derrida, and many others, most especially Kant and Hegel. Priest’s historical explorations are not always detailed (nor always convincing – his treatment of Sextus is particularly flawed¹⁹), but as he says, “My interest throughout is in the substantial thesis concerning the dialethic nature of the limits of thought; the historical material is a vehicle for this” (Priest 2002, 6).

¹⁹ See Priest 2002, 41-48. The first problem is that Priest takes Sextus to have a single argument for skepticism, cobbling together a single argument from the five modes of Aenesidemus, whereas Sextus uses the modes in a more modular fashion as particular therapies. Second, like many modern readers, Priest seems to read Sextus as making a dogmatic statement about knowledge and justification akin to modern epistemological skepticism; this leads him to make the claim that Sextus’s skeptical “position” is self-contradictory. Third, Priest fails to understand the Pyrrhonian use of language, which causes him to posit that Sextus is trying to avoid self-contradiction by stating that he is not stating anything, thereby creating another contradiction. Far from trying to *avoid* contradiction, Sextus’s whole method revolves around arguing that his opponents’ positions can be contradicted by opposing and equally plausible positions. This is a therapeutic use of language. Sextus doesn’t dogmatically state that he’s not dogmatically stating anything, which would be a (dogmatic) contradiction; rather, he’s simply describing what it’s like to argue non-dogmatically.

Priest identifies a schema for how all of these contradictions are generated. The basic idea is that contradictions arise at the “limits of thought” when philosophers try to make statements about a domain that are simultaneously outside this domain (what Priest calls “Transcendence”) and a part of this domain (what Priest calls “Closure”). Because these statements are both inside and outside the domain, contradictions arise.

Philosophical thinking, perhaps more so than any other human intellectual endeavor, is especially self-referential as it encourages us to think about thinking, that is, to reflect on the very activity in which we are engaged as we are engaged in it. As Priest claims, “In general, the arguments both for Closure and Transcendence use some form of self-reference, a method that is both venerable and powerful. Closure is usually established by reflecting on the conceptual practice in question” (Priest 2002, 4). To avoid confusion with the epistemological concept of closure under known entailment and McGinn’s concept of cognitive closure, I will refer to Priest’s idea as “Reflexive Closure.”

Priest calls the situation in which this characteristic contradiction arises “Inclosure.” He represents it formally as an Inclosure Schema as follows (Priest 2002, 156).

Priest’s Inclosure Schema

- | | |
|--|---------------|
| (1) $\Omega = \{y; \varphi(y)\}$ exists and $\psi(\Omega)$ | Existence |
| (2) if $x \subseteq \Omega$ and $\psi(x)$ (a) $\delta(x) \notin x$ | Transcendence |
| (b) $\delta(x) \in \Omega$ | Closure |

According to Priest, this formal schema captures formal paradoxes in set theory, such as the Burali-Forti Paradox and Russell’s Paradox, but he thinks it also applies to other less formal contradictions, such as the Liar Paradox and Kant’s Antinomies (Priest 2002, Chs.

8 and 9). Consider Russell's Paradox, according to which the set of all sets that are not members of themselves (i.e., the Russell Set, here represented by Ω) both is and is not a member of itself. More informally spelled out, $\varphi(y)$ means that y is a member of the set of all sets that do not contain themselves and the function $\delta(x)$ is creating a power set. The contradiction arises because performing this function creates a set that both *is* a member of itself and thus is not a member of the set of the set of all sets that are *not* members of themselves, as in condition (2a) above, and is *not* a member of itself and thus *is* a member of the set of all sets that are members of themselves, as in condition (2b) above.²⁰ Note that applying the Inclosure Schema to Russell's Paradox only requires one property, φ , whereas other inclosures require a second property, represented by ψ .

Next let's look at how Priest, together with Jay Garfield, applies the Inclosure Schema to Nāgārjuna. According to Garfield and Priest (2002)²¹, there are two major paradoxes that fit the Inclosure Schema in Nāgārjuna's work: a paradox of expressibility and a paradox of ontology. They describe the first paradox as follows: "linguistic expression and conceptualization can express only conventional truth; the ultimate truth is that which is inexpressible and that which transcends these limits. So it cannot be expressed or characterized. But we have just done so" (Garfield and Priest 2002, 103). As I argued in chapter three (section 3.5), I don't think we need to interpret all of Nāgārjuna's apparent contradictions as genuine paradoxes; the alleged paradox of

²⁰ Priest describes his application of the Inclosure Schema to Russell's Paradox more formally than I have (Priest 2002, 130). The Inclosure Schema fits the Liar Paradox as follows: Ω is the set of true sentences, $\varphi(y)$ is 'y is true,' $\psi(x)$ is 'x is definable' (which shows that the sentence exists) and the function $\delta(x)$ is " α , where $\alpha = \langle \alpha \notin x \rangle$ " or in other words, claiming that the sentence being uttered is not part of the definable set of true sentences, i.e., saying "I am lying." Then this sentence both is and is not a member of the set of true sentences (Priest 2002, 144-146).

²¹ Quotations in this section are taken from the version of the article that appears as Chapter 5 of Garfield 2002, but the article also appears as Chapter 16 of Priest 2002.

expression can, I think, be solved by appealing to *prasajya* as opposed to *paryudāsa* negation.²² On this interpretation, Nāgārjuna’s negation that he has a thesis, for example, is a *prasajya* negation or as Matilal puts it, “commitmentless denial” or “illocutionary negation” (Matilal 1986, 65-67). While Garfield and Priest disagree with this sort of interpretation (Garfield and Priest 2002, 97), I will set aside the alleged paradox of expressibility.

The paradox of ontology, however, is more interesting as it underlies what I see as Nāgārjuna’s step from phase one to phase two. Garfield and Priest describe it as follows: “all phenomena, Nāgārjuna argues, are empty and so ultimately have no nature. But emptiness is, therefore, the ultimate nature of things. So they both have and lack an ultimate nature” (Garfield and Priest 2002, 103). Garfield and Priest apply the Inclosure Schema to this paradox as follows:

Ω is the set of things that have the nature of being empty. Now assume that $X \subseteq \Omega$ and $\psi(X)$, that is, that X is a set of things with some common nature. $\delta(X)$ is that nature, and $\delta(X) \in \Omega$, since all things are empty (Closure). It follows from this that $\delta(X)$ has no nature. Hence, $\neg \delta(X) \in \Omega$, since X is a set of things with some nature (Transcendence). The limit contradiction is that the nature of all things (Ω) – viz. emptiness – both is and is not empty. (Garfield and Priest 2002, 104)

This spells out, much more formally than I did in chapter three, the contradiction implied by MMK 27.29-30 that drives the progression from phase one, in which Nāgārjuna argues *for* emptiness as a provisional philosophical view, and phase two, in which Nāgārjuna describes the relinquishment of all views. Thus, I agree with Garfield and Priest that Nāgārjuna’s work does contain this contradiction, but I disagree with them that if Nāgārjuna had had an explicitly stated logical theory that it would have been dialethic

²² I discussed the *prasajya-paryudāsa* distinction in chapter three, sections 3.1 and 3.5.

in nature (Garfield and Priest 2002, 87-88). Nāgārjuna has other plans in mind when it comes to responding to this contradiction: he uses it as an incitement to abandon all views, just as he says.

Next I will apply the Inclosure Schema to one of Jayarāśi’s arguments to demonstrate another use to which metaphilosophical skeptics put contradictions. The Impossibility of Considering Duality Argument begins with Dignāga’s strict dualism of *pramāṇas*: perception (*pratyakṣa*) can only apprehend itself, but not inference (*anumāna*), and *vice versa*. This follows from Dignāga’s definition of perception as free from conceptual construction (*kalpanāpoḍha*) – once a cognition contains conceptual construction, it can’t be a perception. Jayarāśi points out that this means that perception and inference could never both be the object of one and the same cognition. Since this is not possible, the statement that there are only two *pramāṇas* can’t – if Dignāga’s presuppositions are correct – be justified by a *pramāṇa*. Since the fact of there being two *pramāṇas* can’t itself be justified, Jayarāśi concludes, “Thus, talking or thinking about the number [of *pramāṇas*] being two is impossible” (TUS 3.3a).²³

To show that this argument fits Priest’s Inclosure Schema, let’s first review the schema.

(1) $\Omega = \{y; \varphi(y)\}$ exists and $\psi(\Omega)$	Existence
(2) if $x \subseteq \Omega$ and $\psi(x)$ (a) $\delta(x) \notin x$	Transcendence
(b) $\delta(x) \in \Omega$	Closure

Here’s how I think the argument fits the schema.

Ω = set of things justified by a *pramāṇa*

$\varphi(y)$ = y is a thing justified by a *pramāṇa*

²³ *evaṃ dvitvasaṅkhyāvyavahārānupapattiḥ*. TUS 3.3a.

$\psi(\Omega)$ = the set of things justified by a *pramāṇa* (Ω) is either justified by *pratyakṣa* or *anumāna*, but not both (ψ)

$\delta(x)$ = “there are only two *pramāṇas*”

$\delta(x) \notin x$ = “there are only two *pramāṇas*” is *not* a member of the set of things justified by a *pramāṇa* (Transcendence)

$\delta(x) \in \Omega$ = “there are only two *pramāṇas*” is a member of the set of things justified by a *pramāṇa* (Reflexive Closure)

The contradiction is that for Dignāga “there are only two *pramāṇas*” both *has to be* and *can't be* a member of the set of things justified by a *pramāṇa* (Ω). If Jayarāśi is right, Dignāga’s epistemology contains a contradiction due to the combination of Reflexive Closure and Transcendence. That is, the fact of there being two *pramāṇas* *has to be* justified by a *pramāṇa* if Dignāga’s epistemology is right (Reflexive Closure), but this fact *can't be* justified by a *pramāṇa* according to Dignāga’s own theory (Transcendence). Thus, Jayarāśi points to a limit contradiction inherent in Dignāga’s epistemology that fits Priest’s Inclosure Schema.

Of course, Jayarāśi might be wrong that this is a genuine contradiction in Dignāga’s epistemology; however, as I argued in section 4.5, it is at least plausible that Jayarāśi is raising a real issue for the theory, one that Dharmottara may have considered as well. Since my goal in this chapter is to give an explanation for why metaphilosophical skepticism is an issue in so many traditions, I don’t need to claim that Jayarāśi’s or Nāgārjuna’s arguments are ultimately convincing anymore than I would need to claim that external-world skepticism is true in order to explain its historical persistence as a philosophical issue. All I need is to claim, and as I have claimed, is that Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi present us with plausible candidates for Inclosure Schemas, even if these schemas are not in the end fully convincing refutations of philosophical theories.

This is part of the explanation for the persistence of metaphilosophical skepticism as a cross-culturally persistent issue.

I hope to have shown that Jayarāṣi adds more evidence to Priest's claim that such contradictions – either real or merely apparent – are present at many moments in the history of philosophy. What should we make of this fact? Priest claims that dialetheism is the best explanation for the historical persistence of inclosure contradictions (Priest 2002, 227). He takes the contradictions to reveal something about the nature of reality: “When I say that reality is contradictory, I mean that it is such as to render those contradictory statements true. If we are to think about that reality in an adequate fashion, it follows that those contradictions must be part of the content of our thought” (Priest 2002, 295).

Most philosophers today would agree with me that dialetheism is a hard pill to swallow. If anything, considerations of epistemic conservatism ought to give us pause. The Principle of Non-Contradiction has served philosophers in multiple traditions perfectly well for thousands of years; it ought not to be discarded lightly. I'm not claiming that dialetheism is false, but rather that it is such a major shift in logical theory that it would perhaps be wise to search for alternative interpretations of the historical data. I think Priest's Inclosure Schema picks up on what may be a genuine feature of philosophical thought, but we need not interpret these results as offering evidence for dialetheism. Priest says that the Inclosure Schema “is intended as an analysis of the nature of limit contradictions. As such, it may be accepted by dialetheists and non-dialetheists alike” (Priest 2002, 279). In the next section I will consider another possible

explanation: perhaps these contradictions don't arise at the limits of reality itself, but rather at the limits of our cognitive abilities as human beings.

5.4 Cognitive closure and the mysteries of philosophy

Colin McGinn's *Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry* (1993) is an elaboration and defense of a thesis he calls transcendental naturalism, which is the thesis that

philosophical perplexities arise in us because of definite inherent limitations on our epistemic faculties, not because philosophical questions concern entities or facts that are intrinsically problematic or peculiar or dubious. Philosophy is an attempt to get outside the constitutive structure of our minds. (McGinn 1993, 2)

McGinn follows Noam Chomsky's distinction between a problem, which beings such as ourselves have the cognitive capacity to answer, and a mystery, which is "a question that does not differ from a problem in point of the naturalness of its subject-matter, but only in respect of the contingent cognitive capacities that [some being] B possesses: the mystery is a mystery *for that being*" (McGinn 1993, 3).²⁴ Unlike Priest, who claims that what appear to be insoluble philosophical issues are actually discoveries of true contradictions in some part of reality, McGinn places the problem in *us* rather than in reality. As McGinn notes, topics such as the problem of consciousness or epistemological skepticism may constitute solvable problems for other types of beings (e.g., extraterrestrials), but for human beings they remain mysteries in Chomsky's sense

²⁴ Given Chomsky's distinction between a problem and a mystery, what I'm calling the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism would technically be a mystery (at least if I'm right that it's not a resolvable issue for us). However, I will continue to call it a problem in the sense that it's an issue that philosophers consider whether that issue is resolvable or not.

due to our cognitive limitations. McGinn makes an analogy between the mind and a Swiss army knife: just as the knife only has so many gadgets for so many jobs, so do our minds only have so many capacities for so many tasks – answering philosophical questions is simply not one of the tasks for which our capacities are suited (McGinn 1993, 6). McGinn calls this situation in which philosophical questions are mysterious to us closure, or more specifically cognitive closure (McGinn 1993, 6, 114). I’ll refer to McGinn’s idea as cognitive closure to distinguish it from Priest’s reflexive closure. Another important part of McGinn’s account is his commitment to realism and naturalism. His realism commits him to claiming, “there may exist facts about the world that are inaccessible to thinking creatures such as ourselves. Reality is under no epistemic constraint” (McGinn 1993, 5). As for naturalism,

The natural world can transcend our knowledge of it precisely because our knowledge is a natural fact about us, in relation to that world. It is a general property of evolved organisms, such as ourselves, to exhibit areas of cognitive weakness or incapacity, resulting from our biological constitution; so it is entirely reasonable to expect naturally based limits to human understanding. We are not gods, cognitively speaking. (McGinn 1993, 5)

For example, McGinn is convinced that it is a natural fact that brain states are in some way related to consciousness, but that cognitive closure prevents us from understanding precisely how they are related (McGinn 1993, Ch 2).²⁵

Is McGinn a metaphilosophical skeptic? He is at the very least raising the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism, and I think he is perhaps a mitigated metaphilosophical skeptic. While his metaphilosophical skepticism consists in his denial that we will ever be able to solve the mysteries of philosophy, he does accept some ideas

²⁵ One of his reasons for this conclusion is that consciousness may possess a “hidden structure” that we are unable to understand insofar as our only direct access to conscious states is through introspection (McGinn 1993, 38-39).

on a philosophical basis, especially realism, naturalism, and the thesis of transcendental naturalism itself. He also seems to be driven into the sort of epistemic modesty that characterizes many mitigated metaphilosophical skeptics such as Hume: “The attitude I intend to produce toward the hypothesis [of transcendental naturalism] is mere respect” (McGinn 1993, 2).

McGinn’s transcendental naturalism makes a lot of sense, especially given plausible realist and naturalist assumptions, and it avoids saddling reality with our cognitive limitations. However, there is a problem: if it’s true, then we wouldn’t even have some of the knowledge that McGinn thinks we have, especially concerning knowledge of whether some sort of naturalism is true. As Nicholas Rescher puts it, “detailed knowledge about the *extent* of our ignorance is unavailable to us. For what is at stake with this issue is the extent of the ratio of the manifold of what one does know to the manifold of what one does not. And it is impossible in the nature of things for me to get a clear fix on the latter” (Rescher 2006, 106). The basic idea here is quite simple: we could never specify the extent of things of which we are ignorant precisely because we are ignorant of those things.

McGinn’s transcendental naturalism is problematic because it specifies too many details about what is supposedly unknowable, namely, that the mysteries have naturalist solutions and that we should rule out already-existing proposals. For instance, McGinn applies transcendental naturalism to epistemological skepticism. He claims that “the resources for a successful rebuttal of scepticism exist only in a theory whose content is inaccessible to human cognition” (McGinn 1993, 117). He rules out various responses to the mystery of knowledge including radical epistemological skepticism, for which he

cites Unger 1975 (McGinn 1993, 111-113).²⁶ Transcendental naturalism provides a better explanation: “scepticism is false but unknowably so: that is the root of our philosophical difficulties about knowledge” (McGinn 1993, 117). It’s not clear *how* it is that McGinn knows that skepticism or other responses to the mystery of knowledge are false or how he knows that there is an answer in terms of natural facts.²⁷

On behalf of McGinn, one might respond that we can prove that there are unknowable truths as demonstrated in a logical proof by Frederic Fitch.²⁸ Without getting into the details of the proof, it suffices to say that Fitch’s proof shows that *there is* at least one unknowable truth, whereas McGinn not only says there are such truths, but tells us that they are based on natural facts and that none of the preexisting positions are correct. How could we possibly know *that* if transcendental naturalism is true? Here McGinn might respond that naturalism has been a successful program elsewhere in contemporary philosophy and science, so we ought to be surprised if naturalism fails when it comes to consciousness, free will, knowledge, etc. This is a tenuous induction as it involves a domain of things of which we are, due to our cognitive limitations as human beings, quite ignorant. While I agree that it’s entirely plausible that cognitive closure

²⁶ As with other areas, McGinn organizes responses into what he calls the “DIME shape” – domesticating, irreducible, mysterious, and eliminative. For knowledge, domesticating theories are various sorts of externalism, irreducibility theories take knowledge as explanatorily basic feature, mysterious theories take knowledge to involve some supernatural property, and an eliminative theory is radical epistemological skepticism (McGinn 1993, 15-17, 111-113).

²⁷ Another problem with McGinn’s account is that it’s hard to predict the future state of human knowledge, as McGinn tries to do: “The future of philosophy will be, I surmise, much like its past and present” (McGinn 1993, 152). However, for all we know today some future paradigm of cognitive science or philosophy of mind might easily explain the nature of consciousness naturalistically, just as a naturalist explanation for the diversity of life may have seemed impossible before the paradigm shift initiated by Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin in the 19th century. We simply don’t know if a future breakthrough is coming, and hence can’t specify the intractability of our ignorance. For more on this point, see Rescher 2006, Ch. 7.

²⁸ For details and discussion on Fitch’s proof, see Perrett 2000 and Williamson 2000, Ch. 12.

creates philosophical mysteries, the very fact of transcendental naturalism would prevent us from knowing whether even McGinn's rather limited knowledge claims are true.

Perhaps I'm holding McGinn to higher standards than he holds himself. He admits he is offering a hypothesis; for instance, concerning with discussion of consciousness, he says, "Closure is not, of course, *proven* by these facts, but they do serve to make sense out of an acknowledged futility" (McGinn 1993, 39). Nonetheless, even as a hypothesis, transcendental naturalism is somewhat problematic, especially when it reflexively turns on itself, thus creating something like a Priest-style Inclosure situation in which the limits of knowledge are set (we can't know the answers) and then traversed (but we do know something about the answers). McGinn's picture may be right, but I'm not sure it goes far enough in the direction of metaphilosophical skepticism. In the next section I'll argue for my own form of mitigated metaphilosophical skepticism, which lies somewhere between McGinn and the more radical metaphilosophical skepticism of Nāgārjuna and Jayarāsi.

What I find helpful in McGinn's approach is that it points to human cognitive limitations as a possible source for the mysterious nature of philosophy. I find this a more plausible interpretation of what causes our philosophical troubles than Priest's dialethic explanation, because McGinn's account allows for an explanation of the difficulty of philosophy and the basis of metaphilosophical skepticism without appealing to a logical theory that many philosophers find difficult to accept. Whatever the sources of this inability to resolve philosophical questions, I suspect that Priest has given a plausible structure of the problems that arise (the Inclosure Schema) and McGinn has given a more plausible account of why those problems arise, at least given certain realist

and naturalist assumptions. Many philosophers notice problems including those fitting the Inclosure Schema that are notoriously difficult – if not impossible – to solve, perhaps due to something like McGinn’s cognitive closure. Hence, the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism arises.

In the previous few sections, I’ve shown how a memetic approach, combined with ideas from Priest and McGinn, gives an account of how and why the issue of metaphilosophical skepticism arises in so many cultures and times. Memes for this problem arise again and again from similar memplexes because philosophers notice the features Priest schematizes in the Inclosure Schema. Furthermore, McGinn’s theory of cognitive closure gives a better explanation for the persistence of philosophical mysteries than Priest’s dialetheism.

I should stress again that I am in no way claiming that either metaphilosophical skeptics or their opponents have understood these conditions. My point is simply that it was perhaps something like the features involved in my explanation that allowed the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism to arise in various contexts.

5.5 An argument for mitigated metaphilosophical skepticism

In this section I will argue for a version of mitigated metaphilosophical skepticism. If my argument is right, it shows that part of the explanation for the persistence of the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism is that metaphilosophical skepticism is true, at least in a mitigated form. My argument has three stages. First, a “pessimistic induction” should give rise to a skeptical attitude about the more robust goals of philosophy. Second, while I am partially in agreement with Priest’s contention

about contradictions at the limits of thought and McGinn's description of our cognitive limitations, I think we should have a more properly skeptical attitude – while there is evidence that our philosophical abilities probably have limits, we can never be entirely sure about the nature of these limits. Third, I think that this skepticism should be mitigated: philosophy can have *some* redeeming qualities, such as helping us develop intellectual imagination, cognitive capacities, and the warding off of reckless dogmatism.

In *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Timothy Williamson discusses what could be called a pessimistic induction²⁹ in favor of the conclusion that “no analysis of the concept *knows* of the standard kind is correct” (Williamson 2000, 30).³⁰ I agree with Williamson, but I would apply such a pessimistic induction to most other philosophical goals as well. For instance, McGinn argues that there is a lack of philosophical progress in general that can't be successfully explained by metaphilosophies that give a central place to empirical methods or conceptual analysis, but can be explained by transcendental naturalism (McGinn 1993, 12-13).³¹

I think an honest assessment of the cross-cultural history of philosophy ought to give substantial evidence for a pessimistic induction about our prospects for philosophical progress. The history of philosophy, with its constant dialectic of the

²⁹ I thank Kelly Becker for this term for Williamson's argument.

³⁰ “Since Gettier refuted the traditional analysis of *knows* as *has a justified true belief* in 1963, a succession of increasingly complex analyses have been overturned by increasingly complex counterexamples, which is what the present view would have led one to expect” (Williamson 2000, 30). Williamson uses this conclusion to bolster support for his conclusion that knowledge is an unanalyzable basic mental state. Although I am in agreement with much of his negative program, I think we should be just as suspicious of Williamson's positive program, since we can expect “increasingly complex counterexamples” to his program as well.

³¹ “TN [transcendental naturalism] has a simple and straightforward explanation to offer: our minds are not cognitively tuned to these problems. This is, as it were, just a piece of bad luck on our part, analogous to the lack of a language module in the brain of a dog. We make so little progress in philosophy for the same kind of reason we make so little progress in unassisted flying: we lack the requisite equipment” (McGinn 1993, 13).

arising and passing way of philosophical proposals, should teach us to be cautious.³²

What kind of progress has philosophy made? Has philosophy of mind unraveled the problem of consciousness? Have epistemologists successfully answered the challenge of skepticism about the external world? Has philosophy of religion offered definitive proofs either for or against the existence of God? Have ethicists discovered the fundamental principle of morality? How long should we hold out for the messianic hope that answers are forthcoming?

Granted, many philosophers make their careers claiming to have answered such questions. But the very fact that other philosophers make *their* careers raising devastating objections against these claims should give us pause and prompt us to ask another question: can we even imagine a philosophical view that would admit of no reasonable objections whatsoever? Are there any philosophical views that achieve the level of acceptance found in scientific theories such as evolution has found within biology?³³ I leave it to readers to answer that question for themselves. For my part, I cannot imagine a philosophical view impervious to reasonable objections. This is not to say that no philosophical views are *true*. Some of them very well may be. My point is that the sociological fact of the persistence of objections should give us pause about

³² Although I disagree with much of what Rorty says in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, especially when it comes to his diagnosis of external-world skepticism, I've always identified with the way he begins his preface: "Almost as soon as I began to study philosophy, I was impressed by the way in which philosophical problems appeared, disappeared, or changed shape, as a result of new assumptions or vocabularies" (Rorty 1979, *xiii*). Like Rorty, I think philosophy develops without solving problems definitively.

³³ I'm not claiming that there are no objections to evolution. There certainly are, especially within fundamentalist religious spheres in the United States and even for a few biologists (e.g., Michael Behe). My point is that these objections are widely seen as *unreasonable* objections within the community of biologists. I suspect this is because biology, unlike philosophy, has more widely agreed-upon standards of evidence. I don't think, however, that this is a contingent fact about philosophy as a discipline. If my explanation for the persistence of metaphilosophical skepticism is right, the lack of agreement concerning standards of evidence is endemic to the very activity of philosophy because ultimate justification memes are so prevalent and open to challenge once philosophical memplexes are underway.

whether we know whether any philosophical views are true or not. One might object that we can still have epistemic warrant for a view even if there are compelling objections to that view. I agree in general, but in this case, metaphilosophical skepticism has far greater evidence in its favor than metaphilosophical dogmatism: skepticism has, with the possible exception of basic logical principles, the entire history of philosophy in its favor. There are even some reasonable objections to basic logical principles: the Principle of Non-Contradiction has been denied by dialetheists like Priest and the equivalence of “p” and “ $\sim\sim p$ ” is denied in intuitionist logic.

I readily admit that my conclusion itself admits of reasonable objections. However, this is a pessimistic *induction*; the conclusion could be false. For all I know, some philosophical question has been or will be answered to the satisfaction of all interested parties. However, until such a situation makes itself apparent, thereby overturning the evidence of thousands of years of philosophical speculation, my attitude will be that of metaphilosophical skepticism. My attitude is similar to the probabilist interpretation of the Academic skeptic, Carneades. This interpretation allows Carneades to answer the charge that Academic skepticism is a form of negative dogmatism in which the Academic knows that knowledge is impossible: “Carneades would not need to assert that he knows knowledge is impossible; instead he may say this is a persuasive intellectual impression to which he assents with the proper measure of caution” (Thorsrud 2009, 80). My metaphilosophical skepticism rests on a similar intellectual impression.³⁴

³⁴ A similar notion might be suggested by the more educated (*suśikṣitatara*) Cārvāka Purandara. According to Pradeep Gokhale, Purandara accepts inference (*anumāna*) as a *pramāṇa* in the “instrumental sense,” according to which “*pramāṇa* need not necessarily yield true cognition. What is a means of true cognition may also function occasionally as a means of false cognition” (Gokhale 1993, 675). If Gokhale is right about this, then *anumāna* would have to constitute a sort of probable knowledge for Purandara. The two proposals for separating genuine from false inference, that it is in principle empirically verifiable or that it

The second stage of my argument for metaphilosophical skepticism begins with an agreement that Priest and McGinn have captured the situation in which we find ourselves at the limits of our philosophical abilities. I'll call this situation our metaphilosophical predicament. I disagree with Priest's and McGinn's interpretations of what's going on in our metaphilosophical predicament and how we should react to it. We need not, like Priest, take such contradictions to indicate the truth of dialetheism, nor should we, like McGinn, rule out most of the currently available options in favor of transcendental naturalism.

Another possible interpretation of our metaphilosophical predicament would be that the situations fitting the Inclosure Schema do uncover a feature of reality, but that dialetheism is false and reality is itself incoherent, irrational, or otherwise hostile to traditional philosophical rationality. For instance, this might be the view of those who take an irrationalist interpretation of Nāgārjuna (e.g., Huntington 2007). For my part, I have little idea what it would mean for reality to be irrational or how one could possibly argue for this view. If reality itself is irrational it would seem that any argument for this fact would be unsound (since presumably all arguments would be unsound), and thus one could never know that reality is irrational, although perhaps some non-rational faculty might tell us this.

The best interpretation of our metaphilosophical predicament is a more properly skeptical one: there seem to be limits to our philosophical capacities, but knowledge of

fits with a worldly way (*laukika mārga*), both themselves rely on inference of some kind. If even genuine inference is instrumental in Gokhale's sense, then we can never be entirely sure that a particular use of inference is in the class of genuine inferences the way we can be with perception (*pratyakṣa*), which is a *pramāṇa* in the authoritative sense. Hence, Purandara's epistemology either is or ought to be fallibilistic. Purandara gives an interesting way to think about the inference that the pessimistic induction about philosophical progress is true.

the precise nature of those limits eludes us for reasons we probably can't entirely understand. Priest's Inclosure Schema does capture the main type of problem that we find quite often in the history of philosophy, but whether these problems demonstrate dialetheism, transcendental naturalism, or some other theory is most likely something we could never know in much detail. In other words, we can know *that* there are limits to our philosophical capacities, but it seems unlikely that we'll ever completely understand *why* we have these limitations.

To argue for this claim, let me make a distinction between what I would call "shallow knowledge" and "deep knowledge." Shallow knowledge is what concerns most people – even most philosophers – most of their lives. Justification memes arise and the challenges are met. Shallow knowledge concerns what McGinn would call problems, rather than mysteries; such knowledge rests on there being some propositions that are not doubted – what Wittgenstein calls "hinge propositions" or what Michael Williams calls "methodological necessities" (Wittgenstein 1969, Sec. 343, Williams 1996, 123). I'm not calling this "shallow" to imply that it's trivial or silly; some of the most profound scientific knowledge of the day, from cosmology to evolution, is shallow knowledge in this sense. I mean only to distinguish it from deep knowledge. Whereas shallow knowledge is where we can touch bottom, so to speak, deep knowledge is where philosophers try to swim by pushing analyses further so that regular justification memes lead to ultimate justification memes, which in turn leads us to situations characterized by combinations of Priest's Transcendence and Reflexive Closure. When we try to touch bottom, we find ourselves feeling as Descartes describes beautifully in the opening paragraph of the Second Meditation: "It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep

whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top” (Descartes 1985, 16, AT VII 24).

My distinction between shallow and deep knowledge is somewhat similar to contextualist epistemologies in that I think there is something special about philosophical activities, but my model has to do with the depth of analysis rather than contexts of inquiry. Anything can turn philosophical. Normal justification memes lead to ultimate justification memes. We swim into the depths of knowledge and find ourselves unable to touch bottom. As David Lewis points out, “... maybe when we look hard at our knowledge, it goes away” (Lewis 1999, 221). But I see the shift of concern from shallow to deep knowledge as a process brought about by engaging in a deeper level of analysis, somewhat like many Abhidharma philosophers see the shift from conventional to ultimate truth. Unlike contextualists such as Lewis or Cohen (2000), I don’t think we need to see the same proposition (e.g., “S knows that p.”) as true in one context and false in another. Rather, I’d say that the difference is between two different kinds of knowledge: we might have shallow knowledge that “S knows that p” is true while simultaneously lacking deep knowledge that “S knows that p” is true. When we progress from a shallow knowledge context to a deep knowledge context, we are doing more than changing context, we are changing the subject. This view is closer to the issue contextualism of Michael Williams (1996, 2004). Contrary to Williams, however, I think this is a perfectly natural thing to do.³⁵ It would be far more unnatural if the processes of philosophical justification didn’t turn on themselves once in awhile given the memetic

³⁵ For a very different argument against Williams’s contention that skeptical contexts are unnatural, see Rudd 2008.

progression from normal to ultimate justification and the reflexive nature of philosophical thinking.

Granted, this is all very impressionistic and isn't meant to constitute a fully defended epistemology as it is. To bring this back to my argument for metaphilosophical skepticism, the kind of knowledge that would constitute a full understanding of why philosophical answers are so elusive would itself be deep knowledge; this knowledge would be an ultimate justification for our ignorance. I've pointed to specific problems with Priest's and McGinn's proposals in sections 5.3 and 5.4, but it seems that any sort of explanation for our philosophical troubles would run into problems. We might, like Priest, appeal to controversial theories that are difficult to accept, or like McGinn, we might appeal to a theory that seems to reflexively rule itself out by making knowledge claims about what is by that very hypothesis unknowable. There may be other explanations for our metaphilosophical predicament that I have failed to imagine, but attempts to articulate any would-be deep knowledge of the explanation of our metaphilosophical predicament fall into a dilemma: we can give an explanation that in turn requires a hefty justification itself, or we can appeal to a theory that involves knowledge claims concerning that which is supposed to be unknowable. Deep knowledge is what philosophers are after.³⁶ And it is that that it seems we can never have. Thus, the proper attitude toward the pursuit of deep knowledge is skepticism: we find ourselves in the metaphilosophical predicament, but we seem to be unable to understand why we find ourselves there.

³⁶ While many proponents of various kinds of pragmatism, anti-realism, or anti-foundationalism would probably deny that they are after deep knowledge, their arguments for such theories betray this denial, since the knowledge that deep knowledge is impossible would itself be a kind of deep knowledge.

The third stage of my argument for metaphilosophical skepticism is to show that, despite the reasons given in the first two stages, I think there are reasons to mitigate metaphilosophical skepticism. As opposed to radical metaphilosophical skeptics, who see little value in philosophy (aside from their use of it to undermine philosophical impulses), I think there are three main benefits of engaging in philosophy: philosophy can be fun, it can develop cognitive capacities such as intellectual imagination and critical thinking skills, and it helps us avoid reckless dogmatism. I think metaphilosophical skepticism should be mitigated in the sense that realizing the truth (or at least likelihood) of metaphilosophical skepticism shouldn't stop us from doing philosophy all together, although it should weaken the degree of confidence we place in our philosophical beliefs.

In section 12 of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume distinguishes between two senses of mitigated (or Academic) skepticism. He opposes mitigated skepticism to what he sees as excessive Pyrrhonian skepticism (I think Hume is unfair to Pyrrhonism, but that's beside the point here³⁷). The first way skepticism can be mitigated is what Don Garrett calls a "limitation of *degree*" (Garrett 2004, 72). Hume's idea here is that the skeptical attitudes cultivated in abstract philosophizing can, to some extent, carry over into the more concrete realm of everyday thinking. Many people are quite dogmatic (a fact which seems to be as true in our day as in Hume's), but Hume thinks a bit of skeptical philosophy might do such "dogmatic reasoners" some good.

But could such dogmatic reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state and

³⁷ Hume claims that Pyrrhonists should admit, "all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease and men would remain in a total lethargy until the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence" (Hume *Enquiry*: Sec. 12, Part 2). Hume can perhaps be excused assuming his knowledge of Sextus wasn't entirely accurate, but for my part I think Sextus is pretty clear that he's describing a way of life in which skeptics follow appearances non-dogmatically (PH 1.13-23).

when most accurate and cautious in its determinations, such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves and their prejudice against their antagonists. ... if any of the learned are inclined, from their natural temper, to haughtiness and obstinacy, a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate their pride by showing them that the few advantages which they may have attained over their fellows are but inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion which is inherent in human nature. (Hume *Enquiry* Sec. 12, Part 3).

The second kind of mitigation is what Garrett calls “a limitation of *domain*” (Garrett 2004, 72). Hume refers here to “the limitation of our inquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding.” Hume’s point here is that if we can’t even have firm philosophical knowledge of basic features of experience such as induction or the external world, what makes us think we’ll ever have certainty in domains such as “the origin of worlds” or “the situation of nature from and to eternity?” (Hume *Enquiry* Sec. 12, Part 3).

Hume says that these are both useful forms of mitigation, but given the first two steps in my argument for metaphilosophical skepticism, I find it difficult to separate the philosophical domains for which human understanding is adapted from those which it is not.³⁸ We might think, for instance, that basic logical principles are beyond reproach, but Priest shows us that even the Principle of Non-Contradiction has its reasonable detractors. Hence, I prefer to concentrate on mitigation of degree.

The first reason metaphilosophical skepticism ought to be mitigated (as a limitation of degree) is summed up nicely by Fogelin in a discussion of Hume: “Although

³⁸ How does Hume separate these domains? According to Fogelin, “Hume accepts a theoretical epistemological skepticism that is wholly unmitigated. ... In contrast, Hume’s prescriptive skepticism is carefully circumscribed. ... Hume calls for (or attempts to induce) a suspension of belief only for those reflections that go beyond our natural capacities” (Fogelin 1985, 6-7). Hume’s theoretical skepticism is unmitigated, but his prescriptive skepticism is mitigated by nature, which causes us to have beliefs about induction, external objects, etc. even though reason leads us to skepticism. Domains that Hume thinks are beyond the dictates of nature (e.g., many religious beliefs) are domains about which nature will allow us to suspend judgment.

doing philosophy can yield melancholy, sometimes – when the situation is right – it can also be fun” (Fogelin 2003, 165). Although philosophy is a kind of fun that maybe can’t be appreciated by everyone to the same degree, this isn’t a problem. I don’t appreciate the fun people claim to have while running long distances, but I can still appreciate that some people find such activities pleasurable. I suspect that Jayarāśi had a great deal of fun composing the TUS, so it’s even possible that he might agree with me here. Being fun isn’t of course a sufficient reason for engaging in an activity (the fact that a serial killer might think murder is fun doesn’t condone murder), but in so far as philosophy is generally less harmful than dangerous drugs or activities that hurt other people it’s not inherently any worse than playing chess or doing crossword puzzles, especially if a small tincture of metaphilosophical skepticism is added to the mix.

The second reason to mitigate metaphilosophical skepticism is that it develops valuable cognitive capacities, especially intellectual imagination and critical thinking skills. Contemplating difficult metaphysical systems such as those presented by Spinoza or Abhidharma philosophers can be fun, but it also serves to stretch the intellectual imagination far beyond where most everyday activities take it. This can be a valuable activity: if you can stretch your mind enough to make sense of Spinoza or Abhidharma, you may be more likely to imagine solutions to problems in more down-to-earth areas like engineering or politics. Philosophy is especially suited to developing critical thinking skills due to its reflexive nature. Rather than simply using good critical thinking skills without understanding them, the sort of thinking about thinking encouraged in philosophy can develop understanding of how and why principles of critical thinking apply. Furthermore, areas of philosophy such as applied ethics and critical thinking (or

as it should be called, “applied epistemology”) might even avoid many of the problems visited upon the rest of philosophy. This is because more applied branches of philosophy deal mostly in shallow knowledge rather than deep knowledge in so far as they seek to apply basic principles to everyday occurrences rather than unleashing ultimate justification memes.

The third reason to mitigate metaphilosophical skepticism is that it can make those who engage in philosophy less dogmatic. Of course, philosophy can also make people more dogmatic and more attached to their beliefs, and this is precisely the disease that radical metaphilosophical skeptics like Sextus and Nāgārjuna attempt to treat. But as Hume points out, a proper appreciation of skepticism can make us less dogmatic: “For Hume, doubts raised in the study can, though with diminished force, be carried out to the streets, where they can perform the useful service of moderating dogmatic commitments. In this way, skeptical doubts can be used to curb what Hume refers to as ‘enthusiasm’ – what we now call fanaticism” (Fogelin 2003, 167-168). On this point Hume perhaps unwittingly agrees with Pyrrhonists, despite his criticisms. It is also one of the aspects of Hume’s thought where his own metaphilosophical skepticism comes through most clearly. His epistemological skepticism has led him to metaphilosophical skepticism, which in turn tempers his own philosophical aspirations (the fiery ending of the *Enquiry* is a strange aberration from Hume’s usual modesty). I find it strange that the Humean (or Dignāgan) path from epistemological to metaphilosophical skepticism is noticed so infrequently today. As I see it, the fact that arguments for skepticism about the external world seem so convincing ought to make us less dogmatic in general. If I’m right, epistemologists should still do epistemology, but they should do so non-dogmatically.

For instance, the assertion that “skepticism *has* to be wrong” might be switched for the suggestion that “skepticism is *probably* wrong.” Other areas of philosophy might be pursued non-dogmatically as well.

Metaphilosophical skepticism might lessen dogmatic attitudes outside of philosophy as well. If metaphilosophical skepticism encourages us to doubt the possibility or desirability of philosophy itself and philosophical theories are the basis of dogmatism, then metaphilosophical skepticism ought to make people less dogmatic. Political, economic, or religious dogmatisms often rest on taking some controversial philosophical thesis to be true. For instance, the attitude that free market forces always lead to economic efficiency (sometimes called “market fundamentalism”) rests not on an empirical claim, but a philosophical thesis. A proper modesty about controversial philosophical theses would temper such dogmatism. Of course, dogmatism can be – and often is – entirely irrational in which case philosophy might be fairly powerless to answer it, but there’s only so much philosophy can do.

In this section, I have argued that a pessimistic induction about philosophical progress and a partial agreement with Priest and McGinn are good reasons for metaphilosophical skepticism, but that there are also some reasons to mitigate the degree of metaphilosophical skepticism.³⁹ This fits into the overall explanation I’m giving in this chapter, because it suggests that one of the reasons for the historical persistence of the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism is that it is likely that some form of

³⁹ Applying all of the classification of skepticism given in chapter two, section 2.8, the metaphilosophical skepticism I favor is general, first-consequent-then-antecedent, degree-mitigated, domain-unmitigated, and variable (although it partially carries over into an everyday context in a Humean way). On the classification of theoretical, prescriptive or practicing, I think my metaphilosophical skepticism fits all three classifications: it’s theoretical in so far as I’m developing a theoretical explanation and basis for it, it’s prescriptive since I think people *should* be metaphilosophical skeptics, and it’s practicing in so far as understanding metaphilosophical skepticism has made me less dogmatic (when I’m paying proper attention anyway).

metaphilosophical skepticism is true. I'm not, of course, claiming that radical metaphilosophical skeptics make a truth-claim about metaphilosophical skepticism; as I argued in chapter three, for instance, Nāgārjuna is not ultimately making any truth-claims at all. My point is that my explanation in this chapter, part of which is my argument for mitigated metaphilosophical skepticism, is an explanation for *how* the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism has arisen.

I take heart from the quote from McGinn given as the beginning of this chapter: "Philosophical theses can sometimes be assented to, but often they can expect only to be taken seriously" (McGinn 1993, 1). It is perhaps too much to hope that readers will assent to the picture of philosophy I have painted in this chapter. I'm not entirely sure about it myself, and indeed, if I the picture I have painted is right, then this is precisely the sort of thing we probably never *could* be sure about. I merely hope this picture will be taken seriously.

5.6 Reframing the debate on the intuitive thesis: Reflections on the experiment

I've come a long way since chapter one. It might seem at this point that we're far from the intuitive thesis and diagnoses of epistemological skepticism. As I argued in chapter two, while a phenomenalist interpretation of Vasubandhu is quite close to the issue of external-world skepticism, it's not quite the precise analogue of the problem of external-world skepticism that proponents of the intuitive thesis might like to see. Things then took a perhaps unexpected turn when I introduced the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism and turned to Nāgārjuna and Jayarāśi. Nonetheless, I think I've made some interesting discoveries about the intuitive thesis in the preceding chapters.

Rather than answering the original question directly, the study of skepticism in classical Indian philosophy encourages us to reframe the debate and to question our categories of philosophical skepticism. The study of Indian philosophy becomes, rather than passive data answering our questions, an active partner in dialogue, encouraging us to reconsider our own preconceptions about skepticism. If my conclusions are correct, I've shown that the category of philosophical skepticism is a lot broader and more diverse than most contemporary philosophers might think. External-world skepticism, while perhaps the paradigm of case of a skeptical problem in contemporary philosophy, is – given a fuller picture of the cross-cultural history of philosophy – merely one variety of one category of skeptical concerns. While the conditions in which the full-fledged issue of external-world skepticism arises are somewhat rare in the history of human thought, the conditions in which the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism arises are a great deal more common. If something like the explanation I've developed in this chapter is correct, we should expect that it is the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism, rather than the problem of external-world skepticism, that is an intuitive part of the human condition, at least in so far as the right factors are present. On my model, the arising of ultimate justification memes sets all this into motion, leading philosophers into Inclosure situations and other philosophical mysteries that we are incapable of definitively solving. It seems to me that this is an entirely natural process for human beings engaged in philosophical activities. Given that the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism grows out of philosophical endeavors in general, rather than the relatively specialized province of external-world skepticism, the fact that it is a more cross-culturally pervasive problem shouldn't be surprising.

Even if readers accept that metaphilosophical skepticism might be a problem, one might wonder whether we're really stuck with this problem as I've argued. Perhaps what Michael Williams calls a therapeutic or theoretical diagnosis might work for metaphilosophical skepticism. Could a Wittgenstein-inspired therapeutic diagnosis work? Perhaps the considerations that lead to metaphilosophical skepticism are somehow deficient in meaning or do not mean what they supposedly mean. For instance, it could be that ultimate justification memes are simply not meaningful, or at least not as meaningful as regular justification memes; maybe it makes sense to ask whether, say, I'm justified in claiming to know that a friend is in town based on a phone conversation, but not whether any epistemological theory that explains such knowledge-claims could itself be justified.

I don't think this works. We can always extend questions of justification, even if those questions may sound strange in everyday contexts. This may be because philosophers enter a special context, as contextualists might claim, or it may be that regular justification memes pertain to shallow knowledge and ultimate justification pertains to deep knowledge, as I have claimed. In either case, it seems to me that it's a mistake to claim that just because questions don't make sense in "normal" contexts that they don't make sense at all. Indeed, it would be far more surprising if thousands of years of philosophy have been based a simple linguistic confusion than if ultimate justification memes grow naturally out of normal human activities. Philosophers, like many small children, are simply people who can't stop asking "why?" There's no good reason to arbitrarily state that such questions *must* come to an end simply because non-children and non-philosophers want to get on with things!

A theoretical diagnosis of metaphilosophical skepticism might be suggested by some forms of anti-realism.⁴⁰ Perhaps I have been illegitimately assuming the existence of mind-independent facts concerning the answers to philosophical problems. Maybe the reason the answers to philosophical problems are so hard to find has nothing to do with Inclosure situations or human cognitive limitations, but rather has to do with the simple fact that philosophers have assumed the existence of something that is simply not there to be found. That is, *all* theories – including philosophical theories – are mind-dependent, theory-laden phenomena; there’s no way to even make sense of the idea of a mind-independent philosophical fact that might serve as an ultimate justification. Metaphilosophical skepticism is thus wrong in so far as it rests on a bad theory that assumes the existence of such facts and our inability to know them.

I have two responses to this sort of diagnosis, neither of which definitively resolve the issue, but both of which I hope give some reason to take my mitigated metaphilosophical skepticism seriously. The first is that I think the concept of a mind-independent fact makes perfect sense. It may be that we can’t think about a fact without concepts, and we may not be able to know this fact, but none of this means that this fact does not exist. If we are supposed to accept the non-existence of mind-independent facts due to our lack of conceptual and epistemic access to them, this is simply a fallacious appeal to ignorance. Furthermore, readjusting the aim of philosophy in anti-realist terms seems to be fixing the game of intellectual inquiry. I find myself in agreement with Thomas Nagel’s defense of a realist conception of truth as the aim of philosophy:

⁴⁰ The line of anti-realist response I develop here is mainly indebted to Rorty (1979) and Siderits (2000). Pragmatists, phenomenologists, or anti-foundationalists might have similar theoretical diagnoses in thinking the idea of an ultimate justification is not coherent or otherwise philosophically deficient.

if truth is our aim, we must be resigned to achieving it to a very limited extent, and without certainty. To redefine the aim so that its achievement is largely guaranteed, through various forms of reductionism, relativism, or historicism, is a form of cognitive wish-fulfillment. Philosophy cannot take refuge in reduced ambitions. It is after eternal and nonlocal truth, even though we know that is not what we are going to get. (Nagel 1986, 10)

I don't mean for this quotation to settle the matter in favor of realism; establishing the truth of realism is no easy task. My point is simply that anti-realism cannot be easily established, and we shouldn't appeal to anti-realism simply because it dissolves problems we may not like.

My second response to an anti-realist theoretical diagnosis is the sort of *prasaṅga* argument against anti-realism I discussed in chapter three.⁴¹ The problem comes, as so many philosophical problems do, with self-reference. What makes anti-realism true? If it's true in general under no particular conceptual description, then there's something – anti-realism itself – that fits a realist conception of truth, so if anti-realism is true, then there's a counter-example to an anti-realist theory of truth, namely, the truth of anti-realism itself. On the other hand, if anti-realism is true only relative to some conceptual scheme, theory, conceptual description, etc., then we should ask: relative to which one? If it's true under the description of anti-realism, this is simply question begging. Maybe it's true given the conceptual description of philosophy, but this is wrong, since many capable philosophers don't accept anti-realism. If we say it's true only given the *correct* philosophical analysis, then we're back to saying anti-realism is true because anti-realism is true. The question is begged once again. Therefore, anti-realism cannot be established.

⁴¹ See my discussion of Westerhoff's anti-realist interpretation of the VV in section 3.6.

While nothing I'm saying here is meant to be a definitive establishment of the problem of metaphilosophical skepticism as an intuitive feature of human nature, all this suggests that the problem is much harder to avoid than most philosophers would care to admit. It is probably not only a natural feature of human philosophical activity, but a feature that we are unlikely to overcome whether directly or by any sort of diagnosis. If I'm right about mitigated metaphilosophical skepticism, this suggests something about the human epistemic condition: we very well may have a great deal of what I've been calling shallow knowledge, but deep knowledge is difficult, if not impossible, for human beings to possess. To put things more colloquially, we *kind of* know lots of things, but we don't *really* know much of anything. Normally human epistemic processes get along just fine, but when philosophers push the level of analysis deeper with ultimate justification memes, we no longer touch bottom. We tumble dizzily into philosophical confusions.

Is this a bleak and depressing situation, as many philosophers would have it, or might we learn a valuable lesson from all this? Radical metaphilosophical skeptics like Sextus, Nāgārjuna, and Jayarāsi can keep us humble lest we become too smug about our philosophical speculations. But I hope – however vain such a hope might be – that philosophy can have some useful task. As Bertrand Russell eloquently states,

Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our intellectual imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance which closes the mind against speculation... (Russell 1959, 161)

Even the most radical metaphilosophical skeptics need philosophy to jettison philosophy from their lives. And the rest of us can learn that in the end our most cherished theories

may not pan out, our self-assured certainties may ultimately be nothing but the best guesses we have. We philosophers are after all *lovers* of wisdom and not *possessors* of it; we may have views (*darśana*) but we can never fully establish (*sidhyati*) them. By all means we should continue to push philosophy as far as it will go. But not *too far*.

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