

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrī Harṣa*. By Ethan Mills. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018. Pp. xxxvi + 217. Hardcover \$100.00, ISBN 978-1-4985-5569-2.



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There is relatively little literature on Indian skepticism, with hardly any monograph on the subject comparable to, e.g., Julia Annas' and Jonathan Barnes' *The Modes of Scepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations* (1985), R.J. Hankinson's *The Sceptics: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (1995), a series of Richard H. Popkin's monographs on the history of skepticism, or two recent competing volumes as collective efforts: *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism* edited by John Greco (2008) and *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* edited by Richard Bett (2010). Therefore what promises to provide a survey of the skeptical tradition of South Asia should potentially be regarded as a milestone work in the research on the history of ideas in Indian philosophy and could be the first ever monograph on Indian skepticism. Does the work deliver what it promises? While I argue that the methodology used to reach the conclusion is faulty, the path to the book's thesis, despite its ultimate lack of support, is engaging and well worth the journey.

In *The Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi, and Śrī Harṣa*, Ethan Mills attempts to provide a coherent interpretation of three important Indian philosophers--Nāgārjuna<sup>1</sup> (c. 150–200 CE), Jayarāśi<sup>2</sup> (c. 770–830 CE; or 800–840), and Śrīharṣa<sup>3</sup> (c. 1125–1180 CE)--through the prism of what he calls "skepticism about philosophy," classically instantiated in the West, in his opinion, with ancient Hellenistic skepticism (e.g. Pyrrho), as distinguished from various forms of epistemological skepticism that principally question the feasibility of attaining any knowledge or certainty in particular domains, such as the existence of the external world, of other minds, etc. For Mills, skeptics about philosophy are "philosophers who use philosophical methods against philosophy itself" and who "neither need nor desire to put forward a theory about what philosophy really is" (p. xxvi; five defining features on p. xvii). As he argues, "the tradition of skepticism about philosophy cuts across the divide between orthodox Brahmanical philosophers and heterodox Buddhists and Cārvākas. It stretches back to the very beginnings of the Indian philosophical tradition and at least near the end of the classical period" (p. xxii).

This may seem an attractive perspective and, also with the help of, e.g., a meme-based approach to philosophy (163 ff.), potentially could explain the historically independent occurrence of the three central proponents of skepticism in different periods of Indian history as a natural reaction to current circumstances. Unlike most other philosophical currents that were practiced in India within particular traditions, classified as philosophical schools (*darśana*) by Indian doxographers, in a manner similar to Ancient Greece, skeptics never seemed, as it might appear, to form any such school or philosophical lineage (unlike the Academic Skeptics or Pyrrhonists) but rather “popped up” here and there as personages *formally* affiliated to as divergent philosophical (and religious) traditions as Buddhism (Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna), materialism (Cārvaka/Lokāyata) or idealist monism (Advaita Vedānta). What should make them all fit into one relatively consistent tradition, consistent in the sense of its skepticism about philosophical enterprise, is their particular argumentative method and non-committal form of negation (*prasajya*), or simply weak negation: “Such skeptics employ the form of debate known as *vitaṇḍā* and the argument form called *prasaṅga*, both of which allow them to engage in philosophical debate and criticize their opponents without thereby presenting a counter-thesis” (p. xxii). Mills rightly defines *vitaṇḍā* as “a type of debate in which one seeks to destroy an opponent’s view without putting forward a view of one’s own” (p. 20), whereas *prasaṅga* is a *reductio* type of argument. These three elements (*vitaṇḍā*, *prasaṅga*, *prasajya*) “formed the key methods within the tradition of skepticism about philosophy” (p. 20). The book successfully engages the reader in the discussion of skeptical arguments placed in the particular historical context of *the three pillars’* debates with other systems of their times, but also against a wider background of skepticism and its justification as such. The book is primarily about providing an interpretation to what the author considers an Indian tradition of skepticism, much less about the actual philological, textual, and historical analysis of philosophical works. It also provides a useful and well-informed synopsis of modern debates on Indian (and general, non-Indian) skepticism and on *the three pillars*, by taking into consideration most important current critiques of the three philosophers, in a range of interpretations as conventionalists, coherentists, contextualists, anti-realist epistemological skeptics, and many more. However, the author proposes his own: that of philosophical skepticism.

Whether the author’s arguments in favor of the skeptical position of *the three pillars* are ultimately convincing or not, it is intellectually beneficial to think along with them. For anyone who wants to learn more about skeptical thinkers in India, the book can be a useful introduction to the tradition of Indian philosophical argument, but also, for experts in the field, it may inspire one to reconsider one’s own views on *the three pillars* and their real or attributed skepticism. The author illustrates the argumentative methods of each of *the three pillars* with selected examples, although his analysis is not comprehensive.

Despite this drawback, such an approach serves the purpose well: it focuses on the argumentative method and not on philological analysis of all relevant passages that have already been given considerable attention by other researchers.

Even though I would disagree on a number of points with the author, including the classification of all *the three pillars* as genuine skeptics, I find the text genuinely engaging, shedding important insight on the nature of their philosophizing. The analysis of *the three pillars* potentially has a strong comparative value: it is relevant to the question of skepticism *per se*, not restricted to its cultural/historical environment of South Asia. There is much a philosopher or historian of philosophy in general could learn from comparisons of ancient Greek or Western modern skeptics with their Indian counterparts.

Still, the monograph suffers from a major drawback which turns some of my positive assessment of it into unfulfilled potentialities. The essence of my criticism concerns methodology. The author provides a ready-cut corset into which *the three pillars*, whose actual status as skeptics is still highly debatable among researchers, are fitted, alongside an assorted range of eidetic paraphernalia from the history of Indian mythological, religious, or philosophical ideas, to demonstrate some kind of continuity of skepticism. The methodology is one-sided: the claim supported (verified) with some selected instances of purportedly skeptical thought (“white swans”) is hardly ever assessed through a falsification test (the search for “black swans”). The question whether *the three pillars*, or other potential skeptics, could be explained differently is hardly ever seriously debated and balanced against other possible interpretations. All *the three pillars* seem to fit into the scheme based on the three elements applied jointly: eristic argument (*vitaṇḍā*), *reductio* argument (*prasaṅga*) and weak negation (*prasajya*), which Mills takes as features defining skepticism. But would such a usage of the three elements not qualify merely as a kind of methodological skepticism? Further, are there no other cases in which we may find a non-skeptical philosopher who may use all these three elements, falsifying the thesis?

A good instantiation of such a methodological flaw is provided in Chapter One, in which the author analyzes the earliest Indian texts in the hope of discovering traces of skepticism. In the search for skeptical roots, or “previews or inchoate first attempts at these later strategies” that informed “the skeptical methods and arguments of Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, and Śrī Harṣa” (p. 2), Mills goes back to the ritual-rooted *Ṛg-veda*, early *Upaniṣads* and early Buddhist texts. A selection of lines from the *Ṛg-veda*, typified by the famous cosmogonical hymn (*nāsadīya-sūkta*; RV 10.129), purportedly are “the clearest expression of skepticism about philosophy” and (at the same time) “an expression of epistemological skepticism about cosmological questions” (p. 6). Certainly, these texts offer the historical background of terms and concepts later employed by philosophers, but whether these texts were genuinely

philosophical, in the sense of pursuing a strictly rational path of enquiry which could be differentiated from religious myth, is questionable. Even though it would be a serious distortion to claim that *homo religious* is by nature irrational, nonetheless, religious myth and thinking is structurally different from that of *homo philosophicus* who primarily pursues explanations of phenomena with rational means.<sup>4</sup> These two spheres should not be conflated. Mystery and miracle are well at home in the former framework, not in the latter. To search for some roots of Indian philosophical enquiry in Vedic thought is right, whereas to ascribe the pursuit of strictly rational explanations that define philosophy to the authors of Vedic texts is misplaced, as it is to take the acorn for the oak tree, unless we speak of “the philosophy of the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*” either metaphorically or as a short-hand for early medieval philosophical developments (e.g. Vedānta) that philosophically elaborated ideas contained already in the ancient texts.

Further, the author’s interpretation of the Ṛg-vedic passage through the skepticism prism reveals another problem typically encountered in the book. Namely, this and a number of other passages are more plausibly interpreted other than as a skeptical attitude to philosophical enquiry. The literature on the *nāsadīya-sūkta*, one of the most commented Vedic hymns, is vast,<sup>5</sup> and most interpreters do not take it as an expression of skepticism. However, we find neither sound reflection of the secondary sources nor serious discussion of such interpretations alternative to skepticism in this case (nor in numerous other cases) in the book, which would prevent the author from hastily jumping to conclusions. Often the author blurs the distinction between skepticism (whether epistemological, or philosophical), on the one hand, and the rejection of certain means of knowing something (e.g. the Brahman, the self/*ātman*) or the acknowledgment that our knowledge does have certain limits. The *nāsadīya-sūkta* describes the beginnings of the world and begins with clear statements (RV 10.129.1–2): “At that time neither the non-existent was there nor was there the existent; there was neither mid-space nor that sky that is beyond (above) ..., there was then neither death nor immortality; there was no appearance of day or night...” By implication, there were no witnesses of the process, because even gods emerged thereafter. Is casting doubt whether there is anyone who may know the origins of the world under such circumstances an indication of skepticism? Should a modern astrophysicist be described as a proponent of skepticism when he or she points out that we may never know what or whether anything at all was there before the Big Bang? In such cases we may at best speak of skepticism in a *metaphorical* sense of being “skeptical about finding a solution to a particular problem.” But being skeptical about a particular problem does not fulfill the definition criteria of skepticism *per se*, which is characterized by its *universal* approach to all questions.

The problem is compounded with the lack of clear definition of skepticism and its unjustified conflation with mysticism or quietism, also with

what the author oxymoronically terms “*Upaniṣadic* mystical skepticism,” or “a kind of mysticism combined with a kind of skepticism about philosophy” (p. 7). Is mysticism and religious ecstasy indeed a part of philosophy, so that we may justifiably speak in this case of “skepticism about philosophy” or “epistemological skepticism”? Or rather does mysticism present a different approach to reality than philosophical enquiry based on reason, which mysticism (as a religious phenomenon) rejects? When a mystic denounces rational means as inadequate and incapable of revealing “the ultimate reality” and instead suggests religious insight independent of reason, this does not necessarily make him or her a case of genuine philosophical skeptic, unless he or she has endeavored to rationally analyze the method and structure of reason-based philosophical enquiry and found it futile. But such approach is not evident in the case of the “*Upaniṣadic* mystical skepticism.” It is not clear to me how--according to Mills--mysticism, based on insight and experience, and therefore irrational, could be reconciled with philosophy, which after all rests on the method of rational enquiry. Hoping to bridge the gap, Mills does refer to “Matilal [who] suggests that rational arguments are useful for mystics for at least two reasons: ‘First, the logical arguments are useful, for they illuminate the mystical instead of deepening its mystery. . . . Second, the human mind is an incurably restless organ’” (p. 128). But are we not ascribing the skepticism label to mysticism simply because it may use the same method which skeptics do?

To justify what I would consider a misnomer, the author claims that *Upaniṣadic* “knowledge of the self remains deliberately elusive, at least via linguistic and conceptual means; this story hints at a kind of mystical knowledge while embodying the second, skeptical side of *Upaniṣadic* mystical skepticism” (p. 9). However, in the very next passage the author contradicts the skepticism claim by saying that

Death tells Naciketas that knowledge of the afterlife is not achievable by reasoning, although it could be known by instruction (KaU 2.9). The self, however, is even more elusive. “This Self cannot be gained by instruction, not by intellect, not by much holy Learning. Only whom he chooses, by him he is to be gained; this Self chooses that man’s person as his own (to dwell in)” (p. 9).

The passage from the *Kaṭhōpaniṣad* selected by Mills to substantiate the skepticism claim says the contrary: the knowledge of the self is *achievable*, and the truth about the world can be known, albeit with different means. Mills himself admits that “the *Upaniṣads* are typically read as exhorting readers to achieve a special sort of knowledge of the self (*ātman*) and ultimate reality (*brahman*)” (p. 6). To know the unity of the self and the absolute is the essence of most *Upaniṣads*. Where is there place for skepticism then?

To speak of skepticism in the *Upaniṣads* under consideration, one should in the first place expect to find a claim that to know the Self (*ātman*) or the absolute (*brahman*) is principally impossible. None of the early *Upaniṣads*

makes such a claim, and instead, all offer solutions other than standard reason-based traditional means of knowing. The whole message of the *Upaniṣads* is almost consistent to the effect that it is possible to know *brahman*//*ātman*, but through other cognitive measures than people ordinarily apply. There is certainly a negative dimension as regards ordinary human knowledge, but could it be really equated with a negative approach of skepticism? To place the problem on a different plane, could we call a Mīmāṃsaka a skeptic when he says: we cannot know *dharma* (the moral law) through perception, inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*), presumption (*arthâpatti*) or absence (*abhāva*), and the sole means is the Vedic revelation (*śabda*)? Clearly not. Analogously, when (some) Indian materialists reject the validity of inference and instead claim perception is the only reliable means of knowing the reality, this does not turn them into skeptics. In all similar cases analyzed in the book, the author conflates mysticism (but also Buddhist quietism) with skepticism, especially “skepticism about philosophy,” which eventually becomes a blurred, distorted and empty concept, no longer useful in the search for cases of genuine skepticism in Indian philosophy, unless one assumes that anyone who brands philosophy and philosophers useless, for whatever reasons, represent a mode of “skepticism about philosophy.” But certainly this is not what a philosopher understands under “skepticism” or “skepticism about philosophy.”

When it comes to the portrayal of *the three pillars*, the author performs slightly better at least in the sense that he provides a (limited) overview of various interpretations of Nāgārjuna’s, Jayarāśi’s and Śrīharaśa’s philosophical positions, but no alternative interpretation is seriously contemplated, and all are eventually dismissed without any further analysis. The author concedes that “Nāgārjuna is perhaps one of the most variably interpreted philosophers in history” (p. 27), at least in South Asia, and therefore he provides an overview of such interpretations--such as mystical, anti-realist and skeptical, even though “both supporters and opponents of skeptical interpretations are sometimes unclear about what they mean by ‘skepticism’” (p. 29)--without seriously engaging with any of them. Instead he rushes to his own skeptical interpretation according to which Nāgārjuna has a two-phase philosophical procedure, the first of which argues for a thesis about emptiness, the second of involves “purging” philosophical strategies as a “philosophical skeptic” (p. 35).

Such a conclusion is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is reached after a rather cursory analysis of assorted passages selected from Nāgārjuna’s two major works: the *Fundamental Verses of the Middle-Path School (Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā)* and *The Reversal of Criticisms [against their authors] (Vigraha-vyāvartanī)*, without any in-depth analysis of their structure or a broader synopsis of Nāgārjuna’s arguments. For instance, we do not find even a single mention of Abhidharma metaphysics, a crucial background extremely relevant to a proper understanding of the nature of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy (the term “Abhidharma” occurs only once in the whole chapter on

Nāgārjuna). The ultimate purpose of Nāgārjuna's purportedly double-stage strategy and its nature, namely "the cessation of conceptual proliferation" (*prapañcôpasāma*) (p. 16) and the abandonment of "all (false?) views" (*sarva-drṣṭi*), which is to result in "skepticism about philosophy," likewise leaves much to be desired, both for philological and philosophical reasons. On the philological side, the central terminology, for instance *prapañca*, *drṣṭi*, *svabhāva* or *śūnyatā*, is explained in hardly a satisfactory manner, with barely any contextualization. On the philosophical side, the problem returns with the question what Mills actually understands under "skepticism about philosophy," inasmuch as it is applied to so many different varieties of philosophical and religious speculation: Abandonment of philosophical enquiry? Rejection of the validity of its methods? Denial that truth can be reached at all? Or is the postulated Buddhist quietism that is taken by the author to represent the anti-speculative attitude, a case of "skepticism about philosophy" or rather "rejection of philosophy"? Further, assuming that the first phase of Nāgārjuna's critique of philosophical method serves the purpose of the rejection of all rational enquiry, which opens the way to some kind of mystical insight into the truth, should we not rather speak of merely a *skeptical method* that is an instrument of reaching other goals, as in the case of Descartes' methodological skepticism?

Is it possible to reconcile Nāgārjuna's skepticism about all views, including philosophical and (most importantly) religious views, which is "to bring about mental quietude, the absence of any faith or belief" (p. 41), with his actual religious affiliation? Why did then Nāgārjuna remain a Buddhist monk living within and revered by a very concrete religious tradition? Whereas it may seem plausible to be critical about philosophy as a skeptic and engage in a philosophical project against philosophy, the argument is far less convincing when applied to religion. To demonstrate the idea within a theological plane: one cannot be a monotheist Christian/Muslim and at the same time seriously question (viz. be skeptical about) the existence of god. Mills' analysis opens perhaps more questions than it attempts to solve.

Criticism of very similar nature can *mutatis mutandis* be levelled against Mills' search for skepticism in the case of the two remaining pillars, Jayarāśi and Śrīharṣa, but for space, I will refrain from going into details. None of the arguments employed by the author effectively demonstrates that the either of them was a genuine skeptic. Rather, we may speak of a kind of methodological skepticism in both cases at best, in my opinion.

A certainly welcome aspect of the book is a range of cross-cultural comparisons in philosophy, such as Sextus Empiricus, Zhuangzi, Maimonides, Montaigne and al-Ghazālī. However, not enough caution has always been exercised. For instance, al-Ghazālī did write the celebrated *Incoherence of the Philosophers*; however, the work was primarily directed not against philosophy as such but was rather concerned with the Arabic tradition of Aristotelian

philosophy (*falsafa*). His skepticism about philosophy was of a very particular nature: directed against what he recognized as a threat to Islam. He provided a plethora of unequivocal interpretations and positive arguments as a jurist, theologian, and philosopher. Further, his skepticism served as a method: “The most erudite scholars of the umma (that is, the philosophers) should recognize that at some point human reasoning breaks down when it comes to final knowledge of God, making it necessary to submit to prophetic instruction for certainty about the nature of God.”<sup>6</sup> This could be analogized to the Indian context with the above-mentioned illustration of the Mīmāṃsakas, who think that rational arguments (*anumāna*) intrinsically cannot reveal the nature of dharma, accessible only through Vedic revelation. This alone does not make them skeptics.

I unconditionally subscribe to Mills’ conclusion that, “whenever the conditions are right, whenever an intellectual tradition attempts to ground its claims in some deeper philosophical sense, there will arise--almost inevitably--a number of individuals who question this very process...” (p. 163). *Otherwise we would have to accept that only ancient Greeks and their later offshoots were capable of consistent doubt.* At the same time, the way the evidence in the monograph stands, the *conclusion* belongs to unjustified true beliefs, for none of *the three pillars* seems, and certainly nothing in the *Rg-veda*, *Upaniṣads*, or early Buddhism (see xxvi), seems capable of supporting the edifice of genuine Indian skepticism. Rather, I would argue, each of them supports other structures. Would that mean that, given all the evidence provided by Mills, we have to reject his claim concerning “skepticism about philosophy as a cross-cultural phenomenon” (pp. 161–63), inasmuch as it is not instantiated in a full-fledged and uncontroversial manner in India?

The terrain of Indian skepticism indeed seems barren in this regard, with perhaps one singular figure known by name from extant Indian philosophical sources about whom there can be little doubt to his unequivocal skepticism, namely Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta (Sanskrit: Sañjayin Vailasthaputra), a contemporary of the Buddha mentioned in Buddhist sources (*Sāmañña-phala-sutta* 31–32). Surprisingly, Mills spares hardly any attention for him (13), classifying him as proto-Cārvāka (p. 78) for reasons unfathomable to me.

Despite the book’s drawbacks, I still consider the monograph a truly valuable addition to the publications on Indian philosophy. Even if an advanced reader may later discover that what *the three pillars*--Nāgārjuna, Jayarāśi and Śrī Harṣa--support is not necessarily constructed of skepticism bricks, the path to this discovery via Ethan Mills’ road-signs and guideposts, most engaging to read, is worth it all.

Notes

1 -- Jan Christoph Westerhoff, "Nāgārjuna," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/nagarjuna>.

2 -- Piotr Balcerowicz, "Jayarāsi," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2016 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/jayaraasi>.

3 -- Phyllis E. Granoff, *Philosophy and Argument in Late Vedānta: Śrī Harṣa's Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*, (Dodrecht: D. Reidel, 1978), 2; Nilanjan Das, "Śrīharṣa," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2018 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/sriharsa>.

4 -- See Piotr Balcerowicz, "Logic in Religious and Non-religious Belief Systems," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 84 (2018): 113–129.

5 -- For a brief overview of the literature and some analysis of the hymn, see, e.g.: Walter H. Maurer, "A Re-examination of Ṛgveda X.129, the Nāsadīya Hymn," *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 3 no. 3 (1975): 217–238; Jan Gonda, *A History of Indian Literature: Vedic Literature (Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas)*, vol. 1, fasc. 1, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975): 136, n. 4; and Joel P. Brereton, "Edifying Puzzlement: Ṛgveda 10. 129 and the Uses of Enigma," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 2 (1999): 248–260.

6 -- Paul L. Heck, *Skepticism in Classical Islam: Moments of Confusion* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 110. This is one of a number of relevant sources on al-Ghazālī and skepticism in Islamic philosophical thought, not utilized by Mills.