

CAN A MĀDHYAMIKA BE A SKEPTIC?
THE CASE OF PATSAB NYIMADRAK
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One of the most puzzling and yet central notions in Madhyamaka philosophy is that of conventional truth. For Buddhist realists, this notion makes a great deal of sense, referring to the convenient ways we have of describing the interactions of the basic elements of reality (Siderits, 2003). A pot can be said to pertain to the domain of conventional truth in that its existence merely corresponds to our convenient ways to describe the extremely complex interactions of the basic building blocks that make up the pot. But for a Mādhyamika, who denies the reality of such basic elements, what does it mean to say that a pot belongs to the domain of conventional truth? This question can be understood from various angles, as explained by the introduction of this work, but it first and foremost concerns the ontology entailed by the radical Madhyamaka critique and hence can be understood as raising this question: What does it mean to say that phenomena such as pots and plants are conventionally real in a philosophy that critiques the very notion of reality?

Among the many possible answers available to the Mādhyamika, the simplest, though perhaps the most jarring, is the skeptical one: Nothing. There is nothing real about conventional phenomena because the very notion of reality is problematic and cannot be used without falling into a dogmatic and hence extreme position. Hence, the wise person who follows the middle way should remain satisfied with suspending judgment about all statements pertaining to how things are and be contented with living in accordance with the ways things appear and the conventions of the world. In this perspective, the idea of a conventional truth is merely a pragmatic and skillful way to explicate our responses to the exigencies of daily life and clear away metaphysical confusions, not a way to do constructive philosophy and find a place for distinctions between what is more and what is less real.

This skeptical answer may appear at first as being outside of the range of acceptable Madhyamaka interpretations. How can Mādhyamikas, who are after all committed to the truths of the Buddhist tradition, hold the position that rests on the suspension of all judgments about how things are? Should not Mādhyamikas be committed to some truth due to their belonging to a tradition that makes all kind of pronouncements about the deeper features of human existence and the nature of reality? Moreover, should not Mādhyamikas take seriously the doctrine of the two truths and use it to find a place for the truths that Buddhism is committed to? In this essay,¹ I attempt to answer some of these difficult questions by focusing on the works of Patsab Nyimadrak (*pa tshab nyi ma grags*, 1055-1145?), the translator and promoter of Candrakīrti's works in Tibet.

I start by reviewing some of the previous interpretations of Madhyamaka as a form of skepticism. I consider Matilal's analysis of Nāgārjuna's refutation of Hindu realist epistemology and Garfield's description of a broad cross-cultural skeptical family including Sextus Empiricus, Nāgārjuna, Hume, Tsong Khapa and Wittgenstein. In critiquing these two interpretations, I focus on two related questions that I consider to be at the center of the skeptical interpretation of Madhyamaka. Should skepticism be taken as a doctrine making

¹ This essay owes much to the helpful suggestions and insightful comments of Jay Garfield, Jonardon Ganeri and Mark Siderits.

truth claims about the limits and even impossibility of knowing or should it be approached in an entirely different way, as a radical suspension of any assertion? And if so, is such a radical suspension compatible with constructive philosophy? To tackle these questions I turn to Patsab's defense of the Prāsāngika interpretation and his refutation of the Svātantrika. The problem with the latter, argues Patsab, is that in suggesting that emptiness can be established through logically compelling autonomous arguments it ignores Nāgārjuna's fundamental insight: Madhyamaka does not aim at rejecting particular views as false but seeks to overcome the very act of asserting or negating a thesis. I show how Patsab understands this thesislessness and contrast his interpretation with that attributed to him by the later tradition. In the process, I emphasize the therapeutic nature of his Madhyamaka and show how his stance has significant parallels among ancient Greek skeptics. I then examine the consequences of this skeptical stance for some of the key Madhyamaka doctrines such as the two truths and show how Patsab understands them pragmatically. I also examine his conception of enlightenment, which he also understands pragmatically rather than cognitively. Finally, I explore some of the consequences of the skeptical approach for the various domains of human experience, particularly morality where it would appear that the skeptic finds it difficult to overcome relativism.

Madhyamaka and Skepticism

Although the connection between skepticism and Madhyamaka may appear at first surprising, it is not new within modern Madhyamaka scholarship. B.K. Matilal, for example, understands Nāgārjuna as offering a skeptical argument against his Hindu realist adversaries and their epistemology (Matilal, 1986: 46-68). For Matilal, the skeptical argument revolves around a critique of our standards of proof as being logically defective. Our epistemic practices are based on criteria responding to standards of proof. We do not just have impressions about reality but hold these impressions to be true in relation to some criteria, which in turn can be assessed in relation to some standards of proof. For the skeptic, as understood by Matilal, these standards fail the test of being logically coherent and hence should be rejected by the rational person. Thus, for Matilal, skeptics understand their stance not just as a skillful attitude that happens to have positive consequences but as the logical outcome of a sustained investigation into the nature of knowledge, investigation that exposes the true limits of human knowledge. We have all kinds of opinions and we believe that some of them are true but a searching inquiry into our justification for holding such a view reveals that we cannot make such claims without involving ourselves into fatal contradictions.

Within the Indian context, Matilal finds such a skeptical challenge in Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, a sustained critique of the Hindu realist (the Nyāya) epistemology according to which our epistemic practices require the support of well established means of reliable cognition (*pramāṇa*).² For Nāgārjuna, such requirement is impossible since it either

² I have opted to translate the difficult term of *pramāṇa* as "means of reliable cognition" or simply as "reliable cognition." The first term corresponds to its pan-Indian usage where means of reliable cognition and reliable cognition are distinguished. In the Buddhist context, however, this distinction is dropped and hence I will use the term "reliable cognition" when referring to *pramāṇa* on the Buddhist context. I think that these translations have the advantage of avoiding jargon while at the same time capturing the reliabilist view of knowledge, or rather, its

begs the question (presupposing the very standards that it seeks to establish) or it leads to an unacceptable infinite regress in which every appeal to some standard presupposes another standard of justification. In either case, the requirement that every claim be supported by some well-established means of knowledge fails and leads to logical contradictions. The conclusion is that it is logically inconsistent to require every epistemic episode to be supported by some well-established means of reliable cognition. Hence, we should dispense from this requirement and realize that we do not have principled ways to distinguish veridical from non-veridical cognitions.

Nāgārjuna's refutation raises an immediate objection from his realist opponent (Matilal, 1986: 64). If there are no well-established means of reliable cognition, what is then the epistemic status of this refutation? Is it itself reliable? If it is, it should be supported by some well-established means of reliable cognition in flagrant contradiction to the skeptical thesis. If it is not reliable, why should we give it any credence? This question raises another question that is both central to the understanding of the nature of skepticism and to this essay: 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 all together different approach that avoids the commitment to any claim through a complete suspension of judgment? Matilal's answer seems unclear. In some passages, he seems to be taking Nāgārjuna's view as a philosophical doctrine asserting the universality of doubt and the unreliability of human knowledge (Matilal, 1986: 54), much like Descartes and modern skeptics tend to do. But as he notices, this stance would involve Nāgārjuna in a contradiction and would render his skepticism incoherent. Matilal is then tempted to understand Nāgārjuna's skepticism in a different way, not as a true doctrine, but as a radical suspension of any truth claim, much like Sextus Empiricus and ancient skeptics tended to do (Matilal, 1986: 66-68). But this would make Nāgārjuna's stance deeply paradoxical. Matilal says:

The upshot is that a radical skepticism of this kind is not, or does not seem to be, a statable position. For if it is statable, it becomes incoherent and paradoxical. (Matilal, 1986: 65)

If skepticism is not committed to any substantive truth, it becomes embroiled in the paradox that it cannot be stated. For any statement presupposes the assertion or negation of some point and hence entails some truth claim. The essay ends up ambiguously, giving the impression that Matilal has a hard time moving away from his Nyāya loyalties and remains wedded to the idea that skepticism is a doctrine and therefore deeply incoherent.

Although Matilal's understanding of skepticism is problematic, it has the merit of raising the fundamental question that skepticism faces. Is it itself a doctrine committed to some positive or negative truth-claims or is an entirely different approach, and if it is so, what kind of approach is it? This question is examined by J. Garfield, another proponent of a skeptical interpretation of Madhyamaka. But contrary to Matilal, Garfield is clear that the skepticism that can be attributed to Nāgārjuna is not a substantive philosophical doctrine committed to the denial of the possibility of knowledge (like modern skepticism, which is

rough Indian equivalent *pramāṇa*, that Buddhist thinkers share. For a translation of Nāgārjuna's work, see Battacharya (1978, 1986). For a discussion of the Nyāya epistemology, see Matilal (1971) & (1985).

often little more than a preliminary methodological stance to be overcome on the way to a more constructive position) but a suspension of all substantive claims. This is Nāgārjuna's famous thesislessness about which we will have much more to say. This rejection of any position is taken by Garfield to be similar to Sextus Empiricus' Pyrrhonism and its suspension of belief. But in delineating his approach to skepticism, Garfield does not limit himself to a strict Pyrrhonian suspension of belief and argues that this kind of skepticism is compatible with a constructive philosophical agenda.

In comparing Madhyamaka to Pyrrhonism (i.e., Sextus' skepticism), Garfield draws a broad picture, creating a large cross-cultural skeptical family that includes not just Pyrrho, Sextus and Nāgārjuna, but also Hume, Wittgenstein, Kripke and Tsong Khapa. According to Garfield, such a family is bound by its commitment to giving skeptical solutions to the skeptical problems raised by the nihilist. Kripke describes a skeptical solution in this way:

A *skeptical* solution of a philosophical problem begins ... by conceding that the skeptic's negative assertions are unanswerable. Nevertheless our ordinary practice or belief is justified because –contrary appearances notwithstanding–it need not require the justification the skeptic has shown to be untenable. (Kripke, 1982: 66-67, quoted in Garfield, 2002: 6-7)

The nihilist (and the modern skeptic) argues that we cannot make sense of our concepts such as substance, causation, ethical qualities, etc., and that therefore we should repudiate them as unfounded. The skeptical solution is to grant the point that our notions are unfounded but to argue that far from justifying their rejection, this absence of grounding allows us to proceed using these notions conventionally. Thus, far from substantiating the conclusion that the nihilist wants to draw, skepticism allows for a constructive agenda in which we are justified in using notions such as self, substance, goodness, etc. as forensic devices or as conventional truths, that is, as making sense within the framework of our socially embedded practices.

It should be clear that I do not dispute the merit of drawing such a broad skeptical family for the purpose of initiating a cross-cultural philosophical conversation, but I believe that questions can be raised about Garfield's picture of a happy family united around Kripke's skeptical solution. For, it is hard to ignore that, as in the best families, the alleged agreement between its members involves a fair amount of papering over differences. If we examine Kripke's description of a skeptical solution more closely, we realize that it raises questions concerning the scope of skepticism and its compatibility with constructive philosophy. There is no denying that the skeptical family is broad and includes various positions. Montaigne's idiosyncratic self-examination is not the same as Sextus' Pyrrhonism, which in turn differs from Philo's Academic skepticism. Hence, there is no difficulty in attributing a constructive agenda to some form of skepticism (Academics are often described in this way), but this is much more problematic in the case of those who propound a suspension of judgment, as did Sextus, who explicitly argues against the attempt by the Academy to formulate a constructive skeptical doctrine.³ Hence, when we scrutinize more closely the cross-cultural family drawn together by Garfield we cannot but wonder whether it

³ For a discussion of an alternative interpretation of Pyrrhonism, see the next essay.

is as happily united as he wants us to believe. For if Tsong Khapa would enthusiastically take part in the gathering (he may be the thinker, with Kripke, to whom Garfield's description best applies), Sextus or the later Wittgenstein might be more reticent. I can imagine the latter scoffing at the idea of such gathering and making some caustic comment in a thick Austrian accent à la Schwarzenegger about youthful indiscretions.⁴ More seriously, 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. To illustrate this point I turn to Nāgārjuna's philosophy and its tradition.

In examining this tradition, we first need to recognize its complexity and plurality. Although most Nāgārjuna's commentators partake in its deconstructive approach,⁵ they differ in their understandings of its implications. These differences are the result of the interpretive choices made by these commentators and reflect the complexity and ambiguities of Nāgārjuna's textual corpus. Some commentators choose to privilege the more radically skeptical passages in Nāgārjuna's textual corpus, particularly the ones concerning thesislessness and the repudiation of all views. Others privilege more constructive and non-skeptical passages where Nāgārjuna seems to make substantive truth claims, as when he states that things lack any essence or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), that this essencelessness is their ultimate truth and is compatible with the basic Buddhist stance of dependent arising. (*MMK*, chap. xxiv)⁶ In other passages, Nāgārjuna also seems to make knowledge claims as when he asserts that this ultimate nature can be known and that such knowledge brings about the freedom from suffering (*YSV* 22-23 in Scherrer-Schaub, 1991: 203-209 & *SS* 68-69a in Burton, 1999: 35. Obviously, these non-skeptical passages lend themselves to various interpretations, but this is precisely my point. Nāgārjuna's texts are far from being unambiguous, lending themselves to various interpretations (skepticism being just one), which are reflected in the different approaches taken by commentators. This does not mean that we should not pursue the comparison between Madhyamaka and skepticism, but that we may be in better position to do so if we narrow our focus and chose a single commentator who offers a less ambiguous Madhyamaka interpretation. Hence, instead of trying to determine "what Nāgārjuna really thought" (a highly dubious enterprise given the rich polysemy of his textual corpus), I will focus on a single thinker., Patsab Nyimadrak, the translator of Candrakīrti's works and the initiator of the Prāsaṅgika line of Madhyamaka interpretation in Tibet.

⁴ For a response to Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein, see Diamond (1991), chap. 1.

⁵ The use of this term may create an unfortunate impression of trendiness and wrongly suggest some exaggerated comparisons. It should be clear that I do not mean here to conflate Madhyamaka and postmodern deconstruction, two styles of thought that differ greatly in the outlook they recommend. Nevertheless, I find some intriguing similarities at the level of the philosophical method between these two approaches, which do not seek to critic concepts from the outside but rather from the inside, showing the contradictions they lead to. This critique is less a refutation of particular thesis, which would "involve the setting-up, within the frame of binary alternatives, of a counter-thesis and the holding of a counter-position." Ruegg (2000: 151) Rather, it is a dissolution of the concept itself, a deconstruction that frees the mind from its grasping.

⁶ I translate *svabhāva* as "essence," or "essential property," i.e., what the thing really is, the property that really makes the thing what it is. Thus, in my usage, essence or essential property is not to be understood in the Aristotelean sense as being opposed to accidental properties but as synonymous with intrinsic property, the hypothetical construct that Madyamaka, as an anti-essentialist philosophy, is arguing against.

Up to now, Patsab had been known almost exclusively as a translator, his commentarial works having been lost. This situation has changed with the publication of three works attributed to him. (BKa' gdams gsung 'bum, 2006) There are obvious questions about the authenticity of these texts, questions that I have examined elsewhere. (Dreyfus, 2009) For the purpose of this essay, however, these questions do not matter. All we need to keep in mind here is that there is a well-established interpreter of Nāgārjuna who understands him to hold a stance comparable to Sextus' Pyrrhonian skepticism. In the following pages I assume that this author is Patsab, although it could turn out that the author of these texts is somebody else, or that they are his but actually reflect the opinion of another author such as Mahāsumati, his teacher in Kashmir. It should be clear that the scope of my comparison is limited. I am not comparing Prāsāṅgika or Candrakīrti and his followers to Pyrrhonian skepticism, but only Patsab.⁷ For although I believe that Candrakīrti and most of his later Tibetan interpreters may share some commonality with Sextus, they are also likely to differ in several respects (as explained in the next essay of this volume), particularly in their willingness to find some limited room within Madhyamaka for the notion of reliable cognition.

Patsab's Prāsāṅgika

The texts considered here mostly focus on exegetical matters and are not philosophically very sophisticated. Nevertheless, they provide an interesting and thought-provoking picture of a consistent skeptical approach to Madhyamaka as well as an historical document about the development of Prāsāṅgika interpretation. The gist of the Prāsāṅgika approach as understood by Patsab is that Mādhyamikas should not try to establish emptiness through a reasoning demonstrating that phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature. Rather, they should take as their targets particular views asserting various possible candidates for intrinsic nature and show the internal contradictions these views lead to through statements of consequences (*prasāṅga, thal 'gyur*). Mādhyamikas should not attempt to prove a general thesis but should stick to the refutation of opinions relating to particular topics on the basis of their adversaries' assumptions, as Nāgārjuna did in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. This is the proper procedure that Mādhyamikas should follow and this is what distinguishes the appropriate approach, the Prāsāṅgika interpretation, from that of the Svātantrika. Whereas the former are appropriately skeptical about the possibility of establishing the view of emptiness as true through logically compelling demonstrations, the latter attempts to do so, suggesting that it is feasible to make substantive claims about how things are and hence that the view of emptiness is correct. Let us further explore this topic and appreciate its importance for our appraisal of a skeptical Madhyamaka interpretation. (Patsab, 2006: 38)

The question of the ways in which emptiness is established may seem arcane but it is not, for it connects to central philosophical issues. For Patsab, the Svātantrika approach is not just mistaken in determining the dialectical tools appropriate to Madhyamaka, but ignores and even threatens Nāgārjuna's central insight that emptiness is not a view but the

⁷ I also do not claim that Patsab holds an original position. His interpretation comes from his contact with Indian Pandits such as Mahāmati, his teacher. In fact, Patsab seems to be saying in the colophon of this text that he is merely repeating the opinions of his teacher Mahāsumati. Similar views are also found in Jayānanda (Vose, 2008). Hence, it appears that Patsab's view was not just his but was shared by a group of Candrakīrti's followers in Kashmir. See (Dreyfus, 2009).

suspension of all views.⁸ Understanding emptiness does not entail the adoption of a doctrine that asserts some essential truths about how things are and rejects other views as mistaken. Rather, it is an insight that frees us from the compulsion to make such claims. Hence, it is completely self-defeating for Mādhyamikas to attempt to demonstrate emptiness through reasoning, for this reinscribes the very essentialism that Madhyamaka seeks to overcome. It is the very project of following the Middle Path that avoids any extreme, that is, dogmatic position, which is threatened by the attempt to set emptiness as the right view. To make his point, Patsab proceeds through a lengthy analysis following the usual lines of inquiry of Indian epistemology of the various means of reliable cognition through which the doctrine of emptiness could be validated, showing how each possibility leads to contradictions.

One of the ways in which a thesis can be established for some Indian epistemologists is through verbal testimony (*śabda*). The Nyāya, for instance, argues that language is one of the four means of reliable cognition, for one can come to acquire knowledge in dependence on reliable testimony. Buddhist epistemologists, however, reject this view, arguing that language is not a *sui generis* means of reliable cognition. Following this standard Buddhist view, Patsab argues that language cannot establish the Madhyamaka view that all things lack a real essence as true, for the simple fact of stating such a view does not make it true. Otherwise the thesis that things have a real essence would be also true since it can be stated. Can then inference, another well established means of reliable cognition, establish emptiness as true, like it does in the case of other theses and as Svātantrikas argue? For Patsab, this is not possible for an inference requires a probative argument (*sbyor ba, prayoga*) whose terms (the subject, the reason and the pervasion, *kyab ba*) are established by reliable cognitions in common by the two parties taking part in the argument. This is what is called an autonomous inference (*rang rgyud kyi rjes dpag, svātantra anumāna*), that is, an inference supported by an argument whose terms are established in common by the two parties independently of the particular ways in which they view things. For Patsab, such an inference is not possible within the context of a discussion of the ultimate nature of things, for if the terms of the argument were established by a reliable cognition they could not be refuted or undermined by any other reliable cognition.

The requirement that the terms of the inquiry should be established in common by both parties and should not be undermined by the conclusion may seem unexceptional, but it creates a particular problem within the context of Madhyamaka inquiry. This is so because this inquiry is based on the investigation of the ultimate nature of things. In such an investigation, one looks for the essence of the examined phenomenon among, for example, its parts. Upon not finding it, one comes to realize that such a phenomenon lacks any true essence, that is, that its ultimate nature is that it lacks such a nature. For Patsab, the non-findability of a particular phenomenon is not just a failure to find the phenomenon through a particular mode of analysis (as it is for Tsong Khapa, for example), but, rather, it shows that the phenomenon itself cannot be validated. It invalidates (*gnod*) or undermines the phenomenon itself. Hence, Mādhyamikas cannot use probative arguments to demonstrate

⁸ I am referring to several well-known passages, the most famous being *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* xiii.8 where Nāgārjuna declares that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views and that the one who takes emptiness to be such a view is incurable. See Garfield (1995: 212).

the absence of ultimate essence without committing themselves to the very essentialist view that they are attempting to take apart.

The Svātantrikas reply that the establishment of the terms of the reasoning by a reliable cognition does not entail that they exist ultimately. The terms of the reasoning are established, they argue, by conventional reliable cognitions that do not differentiate whether things exist ultimately or not, but merely ascertain them according to how they appear ordinarily. Hence, there is no problem in finding a common subject in reference to which Mādhyamikas and their adversaries can argue.⁹ Mādhyamikas can deploy their arguments against their adversaries in reference to conventional phenomena that are established on the basis of common appearances, much like Buddhists demonstrate to Vaiśeṣikas that sounds are impermanent on the basis of the common understanding of sound, despite the fact that both parties have a different understanding of the nature of sound.

For Patsab, this example is inconclusive since in the case of the ascertainment of the impermanence of the sound, the common conception of sound is not negated by the realization that it is impermanent, whereas the insight into the lack of essence of the subject invalidates the subject itself. This insight comes as a result of the search for the ultimate nature of the subject, a process through which one decides whether the subject really exists or not. One then comes to the provisional conclusion that it does not really exist. This conclusion does not mark, however, the end of the inquiry, for one should also realize that the subject does not not-exist either.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it remains the case that it is the very subject of the inquiry that is negated in the Mādhyamaka inquiry, not some other entity. Hence, if the subject were to be established by a conventional reliable cognition, its existence would be confirmed and it could not be invalidated by the search for its inherent nature. Hence, it would have to exist ultimately.¹¹

The conclusion is then that emptiness cannot be established by an inference. Could it then be established by a yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*, *rnal 'byor mngon sum*)? No, replies Patsab, for any yogic perception is born from the habituation to and the enhancement of the insight that one gains through inference. But since emptiness is beyond the scope of inference, it cannot be made into an object of yogic perception. (Patsab, 2006: 48). Hence, emptiness cannot be established by either inference or by perception. How can then Mādhyamikas proclaim emptiness if it cannot be established as true? Patsab's answer is that emptiness is not established as true. 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. They do not need to defend their position as true and criticize their adversaries

⁹ chos can la sogs pa'i yang dag du grub par 'gyur bas rang bzhin med pa nyams ces pa'i skyon mi 'ong ste chos can ji ltar snang ba tsam po gang gis kyang khyad par du ma byas la tha snyad pa'i tshad mas grub gtan tshigs gcig dang du ma bcad pa tsam yang tha snyad pa'i tshad mar mngon sum yod par 'dod pas grub/ Pa tshab (2006: 43).

¹⁰ I am here obviously alluding to Nāgārjuna's famous tetralemic approach. For a classical treatment of this question, see Ruegg (1977).

¹¹ Chos can snang ba dang gtan tshigs tshad mas grub na tshad mas grub pa la tshad ma gzhan gyi (gyis?) mi gnod pas na chos can la sogs pa don dam pa'i bden par grub par thal bas na rang bzhin med par mi 'thad do/ Patsab (2006: 43).

as being mistaken, for they do not believe that it makes any sense to make claims about how things are. Since nothing can be found under analysis, no statement can be established as true upon being analyzed from an ultimate perspective or, for that matter, shown to be false. Even emptiness is not findable under analysis and hence the statement that things are empty cannot pretend to be true, since it sets up an object (emptiness) that fails to be confirmed by further analysis. Hence, even when they offer the proposition that phenomena are empty, Mādhyamikas should not be understood to hold this proposition to be true and to decry the opposite proposition to be false.

Similarly, for Patsab, Mādhyamikas should not take their “conclusions” to derive logically from unassailable arguments. The claim that phenomena are empty is not a conclusion that logically derives from the contradictions contained by their opponents’ views. Rather, it is merely a provisional stance, a kind of slogan that aims at showing opponents the way to get out of the contradictions entailed by their own commitments. Hence, Matilal’s depiction of Mādhyamikas as asserting that the realist view is logically inconsistent and that logic requires them to adopt an anti-realist position misses the point. It assumes that Mādhyamikas are committed to the rules of logic and argue that their arguments are more conform to the canon of sound reasoning than those of their opponents. But this is ignoring, argues Patsab, that Mādhyamikas should merely argue on the basis of their opponents’ own ground and rules but should not have any other commitment over and above those necessary to the pursuit of the conversation.

It is precisely this lack of commitment that the realist opponents seem to miss when they argue that Madhyamaka arguments are self-stultifying. For if it is true that phenomena lack any essence and have merely conventional existence, is it not the case, argue the realist opponents, that the truth of this very statement becomes merely a matter of convention and hence lacks any validity? Nāgārjuna’s famous answer is well known and illustrates the attitude that Patsab sees as being at the core of Madhyamaka:

If I had any position, I thereby would be at fault. But since I have no position, I am not at fault at all.¹²

The realist objection would be true if Mādhyamikas were in the business of establishing some claims about how things are, but since they are not, it just misses the point. Mādhyamikas are neither in the business of defending true positions about how things are nor in that of exposing wrong ones. Hence, they cannot be assailed on the ground of being inconsistent since they do not hold to any view whatsoever. It is this stance of “thesislessness” (*khas len kun bra!*), i.e., of complete suspension of assertion and negation about how things are, that can be usefully compared to Sextus’ skepticism.

Often skepticism is thought to be limited to a suspension of belief about knowledge. This is how it is often depicted in modern philosophy where Descartes’ method is taken to represent its quintessence. For the modern skeptic, we gain impressions at the contact of reality and it is on this basis that we form beliefs about how things are. In doing so, we can be said to be justified, for these impressions help us to various degrees in our dealings with

¹² Nāgārjuna, VV 29 quoted by Pa tshab (2006): 49. For a thorough examination of this statement, see. D. Ruegg (2000). A similar point is made in YSV 50-51. See Scherrer-Schaub(1991): 294-296.

the world, but there is no way for us to know with certainty the things that give rise to these impressions. This epistemological interpretation is, however, quite different from Sextus' skepticism. It is dualistic, assuming a radical separation between the unknowable external reality and the internal domain of our subjective evaluations, which are given to us absolutely. It also assumes that although we can never know with certainty how things are in reality, we can form more or less informed opinions about them over and above how they appear to us. But it is precisely this possibility that Sextus rejects, suggesting that it makes no sense to attempt to think about how things are over and above how they appear to us. Hence, it is most judicious to suspend judgment not just about knowledge but about any view concerning the way things are and limit our practices to appearances.

Patsab recommends a similar stance, arguing that it makes no sense for Mādhyamikas to hold to any thesis, positive or negative. There are, however, crucial differences between his method and Pyrrhonism, which seeks to reach a suspension of belief by outlining the arguments for and against a thesis. In this way, a standstill is reached and the mind is brought to suspend judgment concerning the application of a particular concept (Striker, 1983). The Madhyamaka method does not satisfy itself with reaching such a balance, but, rather, seeks to go beyond the concept by deconstructing it, showing the contradictions that any of its use leads to. Hence, in some ways, its thesislessness can be said to go further the skeptical *epoche*. It nevertheless remains that their stance (suspension of belief/ freedom from view) and their goal (the peace and freedom that come about through such stance) is quite similar, thus revealing the nature and scope of their philosophy.

In Tibet, this topic of thesislessness has excited the verve of numerous commentators, who have debated about whether it should be taken literally or not. Patsab is often credited by later authors such as Goramba with the view that although Mādhyamikas do not entertain positive theses, they hold negative ones.¹³ But this does not appear to be Patsab's position here. His assertion that Mādhyamikas do not hold any thesis elicit objections from an opponent, who argues that although Mādhyamikas have no positive thesis (*yongs gcos gyi bsgrub bya*), they must have negative theses (*rnam bcad dgag pa tsam gyi bsgrub bya*) since they refute the view of their adversaries. To this Patsab responds unambiguously that negative theses are not different from positive ones and hence both are to be rejected. Patsab states:

Objection: Although you do not accept positive theses, you must accept negative theses, i.e., mere negations. Hence, you must also accept reasonings establishing them. Answer: I do not even accept negative theses, for if the essence of that which is to be negated does not exist, its negation cannot hold either.¹⁴

As we can see here quite clearly, there is no ambiguity. Patsab rejects both types of thesis, for both presuppose that it is feasible to make claims about how things are. The use by Mādhyamikas of a negative dialectic does not seek to argue for the truth of their view or the

¹³ Ruegg (2000: 48, 159-160).

¹⁴ Khyed yongs gcod kyi bsgrub bya mi 'dod kyang rnam gcad dgag pa tsam gyi sgrub bya 'dod dgos pas de sgrub pa'i gtan tshigs la sogs pa khas len rgos so zhe na/ nged la dgag pa tsam gyi bsgrub bya'ng 'dod pa med de dgag bya'i rang bzhin ma grub pas na bkag pa yang mi 'thad de/ Patsab (2006: 49).

falsity of other views. It also does not show that there are true contradictions. Rather, it aims at exposing the problems created by the attitude of asserting or negating a thesis. Hence, its actual target is not some thesis to be negated (p or $\neg p$) but, rather, the assent to p or $\neg p$ (or to both or to neither).¹⁵ Hence, far from being a flippant neglect of the most basic rules of reasoning or a careless embrace of contradictions, this approach seeks to recommend a new attitude of suspension of all claims, positive or negative, for they both lead to dogmaticism and attachment to one's view.

Any description, either positive or negative, is bound to be problematic and hence ultimately to be suspended. We may want to approach the ultimate nature of things through various helpful descriptions of the type "things are devoid of intrinsic nature," but it is important not to lose sight that these statements are merely helpful indications of how to proceed in our quest for freedom from suffering rather than true descriptions of the ultimate nature of things, since such nature is utterly beyond any description and radically ineffable. This is so not because reality is too much to be contained within our limited conceptual schemas but, on the contrary, because it is not enough. Things lack any core features that could be seized upon by descriptions and hence language is bound to fail to capture the ultimate. All what language can do is to provide provisional distinctions of how things appear to us (*snang ba*), and as far as the ultimate is concerned, metaphors indicating the direction in which to proceed and helpful therapies to cure the habit of holding appearances to be true.

Skepticism, the Two Truths and Buddhahood

This rejection of both negative and positive theses is of great importance for establishing Patsab as a *bona fide* skeptic and differentiating him from a nihilist. The nihilist rejects the notion of truth to privilege that of falsity. Patsab differs from such a stance in that he does not just reject the truth of all propositions to assert their falsity. Rather, for him, any opinion is problematic in that it asserts or denies something. Hence, Patsab recommends remaining without any thesis (*khas len kun bral*), an attitude of perfect non-abiding (*rab du mi gnas pa*) that I take to be similar to the Sextus Empiricus' Pyrrhonian suspension (*epoche*) of all beliefs.¹⁶ The dialectical tools used by Sextus differ from those recommended by the Madhyamaka, but their aim appears to be very similar. In both cases, reason examines all the possibilities to reach a point a point of complete suspension. Hence, Sextus compares his philosophy to a purge that first gets rid of the disease that it is aimed at before eliminating itself. (Sedley (1983: 12) He also compares his arguments to a ladder to be thrown away once it has been climbed. (Burneyat: 1983b: 139) Arguments are to be used to relinquish all views (to use Nāgārjuna's language), not to make some philosophical point, positive or negative. Hence, statements such as "we cannot know anything," "all beliefs are false," which are usually taken to express the skeptical stance, are to be avoided, except,

¹⁵ We could say that the Madhyamaka negation should not be understood in the usual locutionary way (as asserting p & $\neg p$) but as being illocutionary (I deny that p & $\neg p$ can be asserted). Matilal himself considers this point but seems unable to see how it answers the realist objection. Matilal (1986: 66-67). For an insightful discussion of this topic and thesislessness in general, see D.S. Ruegg (1983) and (1969).

¹⁶ In my discussion of ancient skepticism I follow the views expressed by Burneyat (1983), Mates (1996) and Hallie (1964). Thank's to J. Garfield for drawing my attention to some of these sources. For a discussion of the skeptical dialectic, see Striker (1983).

perhaps, as skillful means (to use again a Madhyamaka term) to bring about the peace and detachment (*ataraxia*) that the skeptic aims for. Hence, skepticism is not a doctrine, but a way of living philosophically one's life without being entangled in the web of beliefs that binds most people and create much suffering.

This attitude differs from modern skepticism, which holds that we are forever enclosed within the limitations of our subjectivity. For the modern skeptic à la Descartes, there is a clear separation between the inner domain of beliefs, hopes and desires, and the realm of objective facts that we seek to approach through various sciences but which actually remain for ever out of our reach. This dualism clearly differs from Pyrrhonian skepticism, which finds the problem not in the separation of the inner and the outer but in the very act of asserting or negating any proposition. It also clearly differs from Madhyamaka for which the deconstruction of the inner-outer dichotomy is at the very core of its project. It should be clear, however, that I do not conflate this deconstructive project with skepticism. Patsab is not a skeptic because he is committed to the Madhyamaka deconstructive approach, but because he understands this project as being incompatible with holding any thesis. For Patsab, Madhyamaka is not a doctrine asserting some truth and refuting other positions. Rather, it is a Middle Way that avoids falling into any dogmatic extreme of "is" and "is not". This stance provides a therapeutic approach that seeks to overcome the problems created by the attachment to any particular view. It is this stance that differentiates him from other Mādhyamikas and justifies the comparison with Pyrrhonian skepticism. The degree to which this comparison can be extended to other Mādhyamika thinkers such as Candrakīrti, Tsong Khapa, Goramba and others remains an open question that cannot be addressed here.

As we can imagine, the wholesale rejection of any serious idea of true statement as far as how things exist has important consequences for several of the doctrines that are taken to be central to Madhyamaka. This is particularly of the doctrine of the two truths, which seems to play an important role for Nāgārjuna, who emphatically declares:

The Buddha's Teaching of the Dharma is based on the two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth.¹⁷

What can Patsab say about this schema, which seems so basic to the Madhyamaka? Is it not contradicted by the radical suspension of truth recommended by the skeptic? And is it not precisely this notion of conventional truth that needs to be preserved in order to find a place for constructive philosophy within the skeptical tradition? Patsab's answer is clear and unambiguous. The two truths should not be construed as a doctrine endowed with some intrinsic validity and opposed to that of other schools. This schema is not meant to create a place for constructive philosophy on the basis of the validity that worldly practices have, for it is merely a skillful means providing pragmatic guidelines on how to go on living one's life. It is also a way to clear away metaphysical confusion. Asked by an opponent why are the two truths propounded, Patsab enumerates a list of wrong views to be eliminated such as the denial that past and future lives exist, the view that things are permanent, etc. He then concludes: "[The two truths] were spoken to refute these views, not because they are

¹⁷ Nāgārjuna, *MMK*, XXIV.8, in Garfield (1995: 296).

established by reliable cognitions.”¹⁸ The two truths are not some autonomous doctrine, a way for Mādhyamikas to have their systematic philosophy while eating their skeptical cake too. Rather, the value of the doctrine of the two truths is pragmatic and hence devoid of normative force. It simply points to the force and value of common sense, thus providing ways for the skeptic to interact with others and help them to free themselves from their dogmatic hangovers and their metaphysical confusions. But such appeal should not be misconstrued for Patsab as offering the basis for a systematic Madhyamaka philosophy.

We may, however, wonder about the wisdom understanding of emptiness? Is it not true? Here again, Patsab’s answer is quite clear. Even the direct realization of emptiness is not a reliable cognition, for its object, emptiness is invalidated when it is further inquired into. Hence, even yogic perceptions cannot be asserted to be true. We may wonder, however, how far are we to take this radical denial of the validity of transcendent wisdom. Does it apply to the Buddha as well? And if so, how are we to understand his wisdom, which is at times described as omniscient? In the third text Patsab gives a very brief indication that seems to confirm that the denial of validity does not concern solely ordinary beings but includes the wisdom of the Buddha as well. He says:

As for the nature of conventional truth it is the appearance to ordinary beings and the grasping to form and so on under the power of the passions and the obstructions to full knowledge. It is also the appearance free from grasping of the bodhisattvas who have entered the great stages [of the Ārya bodhisattva] to the perceptions following [the direct realization of emptiness] due to their not having abandoned the obstructions to full knowledge. The appearance to the omniscient mind is the ultimate truth. This term “appearance to the omniscient mind” should be understood to refer merely to the cessation of the stream of consciousness and mental factors like the cessation of elaborations due to the absence of the way of looking of ordinary beings with grasping and of that of bodhisattvas free from such grasping. This term should not be [understood to refer to] a seeing by taking something as an object, much like the double moon and the falling hair appear to the one with ophtalmia despite their non-existence but not to the ones free from such disease.¹⁹

Patsab follows Candrakīrti literally in his understanding of buddhahood as consisting of the elimination of all the obstacles to the full realization of emptiness. The buddha’s wisdom is not a panoramic omniscience in which all phenomena are perceived in their particularities. Rather, it is the actualization of the full potential of the realization of emptiness through which the Buddha is enabled to help other beings in the exactly appropriate way. Moreover,

¹⁸ Lta de dag dgag pa’i don du gsungs kyi tshad mas grub nas bzhag pa ma yin no/ Patsab (2006:49).

¹⁹ ngo bo ni nyong mongs pa dang shes bya’i sgrub pa’i dbang gis gzugs la sogs par zhen cing byis pa la snang ba dang s chen po la zhugs pa’i bodes shes bya’i sgrub pa ma spang pas rjes kyi shes pa la zhen pa dang bral ba’i snang ba la yod pa ni kund rdzob kyi bden pa yin la/ tham cad mkhyen pa’i snang ba ni don dam pa’i bden pa ste tham cad mkhyen pa la snang ba zhes bya ba’ang byis pas zhen pa dang bcas par mthong ba dang bo des zhen pa dang bral bar mthong ba de ltar mthong ba med pas chos nyid spros pa dang bral bzhin du sems dang sems las byung ba’i jug pa rgyun chad pa tsam la tha snyad gdags par zad kyi yul du byas pa’i sgo nas mthong bayod pa ma yin ste dper na rab rib la zla ba gnyis dang skra shad la sogs pa med snang gi rab rib med pa la mi snang ba zhin no/ Patsab (2006): 146.

this realization should not be understood to be cognitive in the usual sense of the word, for it does not cognize any object, positive or negative. This wisdom is not a cognitively active state engaged in figuring particular objects but, rather, is the cessation of any attempt to cognize reality.²⁰

Although this description of the realization of emptiness is short, it reveals quite clearly Patsab's understanding of the implications of what may be called *Madhyamaka skepticism* for Buddhist soteriology. It is true that Patsab's main concern in the works we examine here is not Buddhist soteriology but the elimination of the reification of knowledge. It is in this perspective that he sees the Svātantrika as an example of how this reification can infect and corrupt the Madhyamaka that is supposed to provide the antidote for this disease. Hence, his main concern is to counteract this tendency toward reification, not to provide an analysis of the epistemic status of transcendent wisdom. But he is ready to draw radical consequences from his views and does not exclude the transcendent wisdom from the deconstruction of knowledge. Even the direct realization of emptiness is not true in the sense that it does not have an object that can be confirmed by further investigation. Such wisdom is true, however, in the sense that it is the final realization of the futility of looking for such a form of knowledge. For Patsab, this is the only wisdom that is available.

What Skeptics Can and Cannot Do

This response shows the radical nature of Patsab's interpretation and his commitment to the skeptical idea of suspension of all belief, positive or negative. It is in this perspective that we may want to consider the question of the possibility of constructive philosophy within skepticism. We recall Garfield's description of the happy family united around Kripke's skeptical solution. It should come as no surprise that Patsab finds it difficult to take part in such gathering, for he refuses to find any place for knowledge, or, rather, its Indian counterpart, reliable cognition, within Madhyamaka philosophy, even on the conventional level. He says:

As for the first point concerning the answer to five questions about reliable cognitions, one could ask: do you accept that there are objects of reliable cognitions (*gzhal bya, prameya*)? Answer: I do not accept reliable cognition, since both reliable cognitions and their objects have been refuted [by Nāgārjuna in his] *Vigrahavyārtanī*. This is so because reliable cognitions require objects but no such objects exist. Some hold both that conventional reliable cognitions realize [their objects] in accordance with what is renown and that the ultimate is realized [by ultimate reliable cognitions]. This is incorrect for those who accept conventional reliable cognition [have to accept that] inasmuch as a reliable cognition realizes its object it cannot be invalidated by another reliable cognition. Hence, [its object] would have to be real and it would be impossible to assert conventional reliable cognition as a second kind. As long as the object of a cognition is established, it has to be true. Hence, no reliable cognition can ever exist and we do not accept [this notion]. Objection: If there are no reliable cognition, the distinction between the two truths cannot be? Answer: I accept that ultimately the distinction between the two truths

²⁰ For an excellent discussion of the views of Candrakīrti and Shāntarakṣita concerning omniscience, see McClintock (2000).

does not exist. It is not established in reality but has been taught by Buddha and the Noble Ones (or the two Noble Ones, i.e., Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva) conventionally for some [particular] need.²¹

Patsab rejects completely the notion of reliable cognition and suggests a clear and thorough skepticism that seems to exclude the possibility of a constructive program. For Patsab, it does not make any sense for a Mādhyamika to try to find a place for reliable cognition, either on the ultimate or on the conventional level. For cognition to be reliable, it must be uncontradicted by other cognitions, that is, its object cannot be invalidated by any subsequent inquiry. But this is precisely what happens when the object of cognition is examined within the context of Madhyamaka inquiry. There, upon searching for its essence, the inquiry comes to the realization that the object does not really exist, that our idea of an object existing really independently of our conceptions, is deeply incoherent. Hence, the cognition of such an object, which posits such an object as really existing, cannot be true. Even the direct realization of emptiness is not, as we just saw, true. Hence, for Patsab, there is no place whatsoever within Madhyamaka for the notion of reliable cognition, for it threatens to reintroduce the very extremes that this approach seeks to overcome. In that, Patsab takes a very radical position that differentiates him from many other Mādhyamikas, even perhaps from Candrakīrti, who seems to want to find some place, however limited, for reliable cognition.²² This radical rejection of reliable cognition has fatal consequences for the project of a constructive Madhyamaka philosophy. For to get off the ground, this project would require a principled way to differentiate reliable from non-reliable cognitions. But since this differentiation is not feasible, there cannot be any principled way to distinguish what can be validly asserted from cannot be, and hence the very idea of a Madhyamaka constructive philosophy becomes untenable.

Sextus seems to entertain a similar approach when he decries the attempt to find a place for constructive philosophy within skepticism by some of the members of the Academy in their debate against Stoic opponents. Carneades, for example, is depicted as advocating a fallibilism based on the distinction between more or less convincing impressions.²³ We are subjects to experiences, things appear to us in certain ways, and this can be taken as a basis for a constructive program that differentiates between more or less reliable impressions, the

²¹ Gnyis pa tshad ma la dri ba lnga'i lan gdab pa las dang po ni khyod gzhal bya khas mi len na tshad khas len nam ma yin zhe na/ nged tshad ma khas mi len te tshad ma dang gzhal bya gnyis ka rtsod zlog du bkag pas te/ tshad ma la gzhal bya yod rgos la gzhal bya med pa'i phyir ro/ kha cig tha snyad pa'i tshad ma grags tshod du 'jal ba dang don dam 'jal ba gnyis yod zer na/ myi 'thad de tha snyad pa'i tshad mar 'dod pa des rtogs pa'i don la tshad ma yin phan cod tshad ma gzhan gnyis mi gnod pas de yang dag du 'gyur bas na tha snyad pa'i tshad ma ces pa dang gnyis med kyi tshad ma gcig grub na de'i don bden par 'gyur bas na tshad ma gang yang med de khas mi len to/ tshad ma med na bden pa gnyis kyi dbye med par 'gyur ro zhe na/ bden pa gnyis kyi dbye ba don dam par med par thal ba 'dod thog yin pa la/ don do 'chad bka' tha snyad du rgos pa'i dbang gis bu ta dang 'phags pa dag gsung bas so/ Patsab (2006: 49).

²² Within the scope of such a short essay I cannot do justice to this topic, which has been already well examined by Siderits (1980) (1981).

²³ I am alluding here to the *pithanon* doctrine of convincing impressions. It appears, however, that Carneades did not hold this view but merely used it as an argument against Stoic. Nevertheless, it remains true that this idea was adopted by later skeptics such as Philo as the official doctrine of the Academy. Sedley (1983: 18).

former being those that are not contradicted or reversed by any other impression.²⁴ This absence of contradiction provides only a fallible criterion that allows for the distinction between the convincing impressions that are to be assented to provisionally and those that are to be rejected. But as Sextus argues following Aenesidemus, once the skeptic enters into the game of sifting through appearances to decide which one is the best guide for understanding how things are, she is in danger of reintroducing the very dogmatism that she sought to dispense with. Convincing impressions may be only provisional or probable truths, but they are truths nevertheless, that is, opinions about how things really are over and above the ways they appear to this or that person, and hence clear departures from the Pyrrhonian ideals of sticking to appearances and living free from *doxa* advocated by Sextus. (Mates, 1996)

This does not mean that the skeptic remains cognitively or morally inert, for she lives in accordance with how things appear. Sextus offers a fourfold scheme of life that illustrates how the skeptic can lead a perfectly normal life. First, the skeptic is guided by nature, following natural dispositions, perceptions, thoughts, etc. She also follows the inclinations of her body, appetites, etc. Hence, there is no problem for the skeptic to avoid putting her hand in the fire, to eat when hungry or to take a medicine when sick (Sextus was a doctor). The skeptic has also no problem in living through normal social intercourses. She is acutely aware that her appearances are not those of an isolated individual but those of a social being who follows the rules and laws of the community in which she lives. It is in such a context, that she earns a living, learns a trade, performs some function, etc., in conformity with the rules and standards of her community in ways appropriate to her situation. (Burneyat, 1983b) Hence, there is no problem for the skeptic to live a normal active life in accordance with *sensus communis*.

Patsab is not explicit in discussing the implications of his approach for daily life and Buddhist practice. I take it that he would be sympathetic to Sextus' recommendations of living according to common sense. This is after all what Candrakīrti already recommended, a way of life that follows the common sense of cowherds while keeping an important place for Buddhist practice understood as an extension of what humans naturally seek, namely, freedom from suffering and well-being. Hence, I believe that we can use Sextus' discussion of the skeptical way of life to clarify the implications of Patsab's Madhyamaka for the various domains of human practice, topics not directly addressed by our author, who is mostly preoccupied by the task of differentiating his Prāsaṅgika approach from the Svātantrika. One of the topics that require examination is that of the skeptic's commitment to Buddhist tradition, for one may wonder how she can claim to be Buddhist, given her commitment to a total suspension of belief? Isn't such an attitude antithetical to the faith necessary for religious commitment? For it may seem that without some belief in the validity of core doctrines such as the four noble truths, it would be difficult for the reflective person that the skeptic is bound to be committed to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And without such commitment, any claim of allegiance to the Buddhist tradition remains hollow.

Here again, the assumption that skepticism is antithetical to commitment is mistaken. Historically, skepticism has often served as a way to argue for religion, as for example during

²⁴ There is here an obvious comparison with Tsong Khapa's attempt to provide criteria to distinguish nominal existence from pure fictions. The main criteria that he suggested for an object to exist nominally is for its cognition to remain uncontradicted by other cognitions. See Tsong Khapa (2000), 163-184.

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when catholic apologists were fond of using skeptical arguments for emphasizing the weaknesses of human reason and the need for relying on faith and church. (Penelhum, 1983) Conceptually, skepticism does not contradict faith, which is not identical to belief. The skeptic is prevented by her commitments from entertaining opinions about the way things really are. But she acknowledges that things appear in certain ways to her depending on the situation in which she finds herself. Hence, there is no problem for entertaining commitments as long as they remain based on the way things appear to her. Skepticism does not entail a denial of appearances but a suspension of the assent to these appearances so as to find freedom within the confines of the situation in which the skeptic finds herself. Hence, a skeptic is in no way committed to mental blankness and can appraise the way things appear to her and make commitments on this basis.

For example, the skeptic notices that she experiences suffering, that her body seems to get sick, become old, that it seems to her that all people around her die at some point. She also notices that it appears to her that her suffering is largely due to the fact that she clings to her body, herself, etc. She also notices that it seems to her that detachment promotes greater peace and long lasting satisfaction. She can assume from this that were she to strengthen this attitude through spiritual exercises she might well get to a state where it would appear to her that she is free from being affected by the troubles of human existence. In fact, it is precisely such a peace (*ataraxia*) that the ancient skeptics were seeking. Hence, far from being incompatible with a commitment to Buddhism, skepticism appears to be germane to this tradition and in no way incompatible with Buddhist commitments, which are less based on the belief in a creed than on the trust that the tradition provides the resources necessary for self-transformation. The skeptic can even entertain doctrines such as reincarnation and the law of karma provided that she understands them pragmatically rather than dogmatically. The skeptic finds it difficult to believe pronouncements about multiple lifetimes and the ethical consequences of various actions in this extended framework, but she has no problem with the ethical recommendations of these central doctrines. As for their metaphysical dimension, the skeptic does not feel any need to reject them. Because her attitude of suspension of belief entails a suspension of disbelief, she does not need to decide whether such doctrines are true or not, but can continue to inquire into these doctrines while taking very seriously the ethical commitments that they recommend.

Thus, one can see that skepticism creates no problem for living one's life in the normal way with all the commitments that this implies, including religious ones. Things appear in certain ways and it is on this basis that the skeptic can make decisions concerning all the spheres of life, not just the most immediate ones. But it is important to keep in mind that these criteria are just guidelines for practical living, not ways to distinguish the true from the false, the more probable from the less so. Hence, such criteria do not provide the basis for a constructive philosophical program, which, for the Pyrrhonian skeptic, is in fact nothing but a way to reintroduce through the back door the idea that we can make sense of claims about how things are. Within the Madhyamaka context, we may want to take these criteria as explicating the notion of conventional truth but we should remember that this notion is not a philosophical position to be defended even on the conventional level. Rather, the idea of conventional truth is just a skillful means for pointing out the ways in which metaphysical positions confuse common sense. It also provides a convenient way of talking about how the skeptic lives and interacts with others based on the way things appear to her in accordance

with common sense. But there is one thing that the skeptic cannot do, namely, to hold that what appears to her is true, that is, that it has any normative force, even conventionally. For this would contradict the basic Madhyamaka insight that things do not exist the way they appear ordinarily.

The question is often raised of whether the skeptic can make the proper ethical distinctions. Can she, for example, avoid becoming embroiled into atrocities if she has no belief about whether it is good or not to torture people? I think that the answer is not particularly difficult. Although the skeptic may have no belief about how things really are, she can make decisions on the basis of how things appear to her. It appears to her, for example, that when she is water boarded she becomes greatly distressed. She can also notice that it appears to her that other people exposed to the same treatment are greatly distressed too. On this basis she can make a decision to abstain from treating people in this way. What she cannot do, however, is to argue that her decision is right and should have any binding force on others. Faced by the Ashcrofts of this world, she cannot hold them to be mistaken and argue that it is wrong to torture other human beings. All she can do is to make recommendations, arguing that not torturing other people has worked well for her, that torturing others appear to her not to promote well-being in herself and others, etc., but she will find it difficult to come up with stronger arguments. All what she can provide are skillful rhetorical exhortations to entice people to reform themselves and try other ways. In her perspective, all moral commandments are merely rhetorical recommendations to entice people to give up behaviors that appear harmful to her.

This suspension of normativity may seem a nihilistic unleashing of the specter of complete moral relativism. It appears to the skeptic that torture is not a good thing, but things appear differently to John Ashcroft. Can the skeptic do anything to advance her discussion with Ashcroft and argue against torture? I believe that she can, though I am not sure how far this possibility can take her. What she can do is to argue on Ashcroft's own ground that as a Christian he should not do to others what he does not want to undergo himself. This type of argument is actually quite important for the skeptic, for she has often no other recourse but to argue on others' ground. Many of the arguments provided by the ancient Greek skeptics, particularly those directed at the Stoics, must be read in this way, as arguing from the others' premises rather than providing what Prāsāngikas would describe as autonomous reasoning. Similarly, for Patsab and the Prāsāngika tradition, Madhyamaka arguments should proceed on this basis, for any other way would entangle Mādhyamikas in the extreme views that they seek to free themselves from. Hence, for Patsab, Mādhyamikas should not provide autonomous arguments proving that things lack inherent nature but, rather, argue on the opponents' ground, using the rules and premises they accept. I believe that the skeptic has the same recourse in the moral domain, where she can mount arguments to persuade her opponents of trying the attitudes and behaviors that she recommends on the basis of their own commitments. Hence, I take it that it is not true that a skeptical approach necessarily entails a conservative stance, as it is often claimed. The skeptic is quite free to advocate for radical changes. It is also not true that skepticism entails a nihilistic denial of the validity of moral distinctions. The skeptic can make such distinctions. What she cannot do, however, is hold her recommendations as moral imperatives that are true regardless of whether we recognize them as such. Hence, it would seem that the skeptic is committed to a certain form of relativism inasmuch as she can never

claim to go beyond the ways things appear to her and this may be, in the long run, a more restrictive stance than it may first appear.

Whether this is true or not is not a question we can tackle in this short essay. What we have more modestly done here is to examine Patsab's approach and its implications for our understanding of Madhyamaka, its relation to skepticism, and the doctrine of the two truths. This has allowed us to make at least two significant points. First, Patsab has provided us with a clear and unambiguous skeptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna based on the radical suspension of all theses and the repudiation of any form of reliable cognition. In doing so, he has allowed us to refine the comparison between Madhyamaka and skepticism (particularly in its Pyrrhonian form) while raising questions about its scope. For if it is true that Patsab can be described as a Pyrrhonian skeptic in that he completely rejects any position and any idea of reliable cognition, it is not clear to which degree this description applies comfortably to other Mādhyamikas (even to Candrakīrti) in that they do not seem to be as ready as our thinker to deny any role to reliable cognition and seem more favorably inclined toward the project of a constructive Madhyamaka philosophy.

Second, in rejecting the notion of reliable cognition, Patsab makes it clear that the project of a constructive Madhyamaka philosophy is deeply problematic, for it threatens to reintroduce the extremes that this middle way seeks to deconstruct. This warning against the dangers of constructive philosophy also concerns the Pyrrhonian skeptic, whose suspension of belief may well be jeopardized by the reintroduction through the back door of dogmatic positions under the guise of constructive philosophy. Instead, the skeptic should remain content to suspend judgment and follow *sensus communis*, using its resources without attempting to go beyond how things appear to her. It is a similarly skeptical approach that Patsab seems to recommend to his fellow Mādhyamikas, who, in his eye, too often succumb to the temptation of using the two truths to elaborate a constructive Madhyamaka philosophy. For Patsab this represents a reintroduction of extreme positions within Madhyamaka and hence a direct threat to the deconstructive approach that is at the heart of this tradition. Whether he is right or not is a question we cannot settle here. But what we have done here is to take seriously his challenge and raise this question. Can Mādhyamikas use the notion of conventional truth without reintroducing the very essentialism that they seek to overcome? This is a question that every Madhyamaka interpretation has to face. Hence, Patsab's skeptical interpretation may not be the final word in Madhyamaka philosophy but it certainly offers a challenge that cannot be ignored.

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