



Epoche and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West

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Jay L. Garfield *Epoche and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West*

The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.

Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages.

And in fact both are right and both wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if *everything* were explained.

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.371, 6.372

Sextus regarded skepticism not as a nihilistic attack on our cognitive life, but rather—as he emphasizes in a variety of medical metaphors—as a form of philosophical therapy, to cure us of the cognitive and emotional ills born of extreme metaphysical, moral, or epistemological positions.

. . . [T]he Sceptic's end, where matters of opinion are concerned, is mental tranquility; in the realm of things unavoidable, moderation of feeling is the end. . . . Upon his suspension of judgment there followed, by chance, mental tranquility in matters of opinion. For the person who entertains the opinion that anything is by nature good or bad is continually disturbed. When he lacks those things that seem to him to be good, he believes he is being pursued, as if by the Furies, by those things which are by nature bad, and pursues what he believes to be the good things. . . . On the other side there is the man who leaves undetermined the question of what things are good and bad by nature. He does not exert himself to avoid anything or to seek after anything, and hence he is in a tranquil state. (Hallie 1985, p. 41)

The Sceptic wishes, from considerations of humanity, to do all he can with the arguments at his disposal to cure the self-conceit and rashness of the dogmatists. And so just as healers of bodily ailments keep remedies of various potency, and administer the powerful ones to those whose ailments are violent and the lighter ones to those with light complaints, in the same manner the Sceptic too propounds arguments . . . capable of forcibly removing the condition of dogmatist self-conceit. (Ibid., p. 128)

(Wittgenstein also adopts the medical metaphor: “The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness” (*Philosophical Investigations* 255)). It should go without saying that as far as Sextus was concerned, skepticism is a *moderate* position, as compared with the available alternatives.

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Moreover, Sextus argued, the serene equanimity that is the goal of skeptical practice is to be attained by the achievement of the “suspension of belief” in favor of receiving cognitive and practical guidance from “the guidance of nature, the compulsion of the feelings, the tradition of laws and customs, and the instruction of the arts” (ibid., p. 40). Again, it is important to note that whatever Sextus has in mind by the “suspension of belief” or the “refusal to assert,” he *does not mean* that we are to become cognitively inert, inactive, or disengaged, epistemically or otherwise. For neither art, custom, perception, nor appetite encourage such a life. Moreover, such a life or attitude towards knowledge would be extreme, and, again, skepticism is a moderate position. And finally, by any standards, such a rejection of epistemic and moral life would be, in a straightforward sense, sick. And skepticism is intended as a cure for just such ills.

It is important to emphasize these points because many modern writers—following Kant and earlier usage introduced by Berkeley and muddled (though in constructive ways) by Hume—urge that a central task of philosophy is to “answer the skeptic”: to show, presumably, that what the skeptic denies to be possible is in fact not only possible, but actual. To adopt a later medical metaphor, this endeavor strikes me as a form of philosophical *resistance* in the psychoanalytic sense, a consequence of the very disease of which the skeptic intends to cure philosophers. It is more appropriate, I will argue, not to resist skeptical arguments, but to attend carefully to them. In particular, I will argue that resistance to skepticism rests on a confusion of skepticism with one of its extreme targets—typically what I follow the Buddhist skeptics in calling “nihilism.” Such a confusion mistakes the point of skeptical arguments, the conclusions of the critical portions of the skeptical enterprise, and, most importantly, the skeptical solutions, as Hume and more recently Kripke (1982, pp. 66–68) have described them, that skepticism offers to the puzzles it generates.

Much of the confusion I hope to clear up is understandable given the expositions of skepticism with which many of us are most familiar. I have in mind those of Sextus, Hume, and Wittgenstein, with appropriate ancillary figures in tow. For a variety of historical, rhetorical, and other reasons, these expositions have not placed at center stage either the opposition of extremes against which skeptical critical attacks are addressed, or the ways in which the skeptical solutions to the problems ostensibly solved by these extreme positions constitute what can simultaneously be seen as a *via media* between, and a complete rejection of the presuppositions of, those extreme positions. But skeptical philosophy is a cross-cultural phenomenon. A rich skeptical tradition is present in Mādhyamika Buddhist philosophy, and particularly the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika tradition is startlingly akin to the Western skeptical tradition, in respect of its aims, methodology, and philosophical problematic.

Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, like Sextus, emphasize the therapeutic nature of philosophy:

[39] If one understands how actions are devoid of inherent existence, then he sees the suchness of actions. When he has seen suchness, he will have eliminated ignorance, and when there is no ignorance then actions which are caused by ignorance cannot arise in him, and so the results of actions such as consciousness and so forth, up to acting and death will not be experienced by him. (Komito 1987, p. 89)

[73]. . . With the elimination of wrong views they will have abandoned attachment, closed-mindedness and hatred and thereby attain nirvana unstained by wrong views. (Ibid., p. 95)

As it is said in the *Samadhiraja Sutra*, “An existential element ‘desire’ would be roused by something in someone; an existential element ‘aversion’ would be aversion in someone to something; an existential element ‘illusion’ would be illusion in someone concerning something.” Such an element of existence one cannot discover in thought nor perceive in fact. One who does not discover such an existential element in thought nor perceive it in fact is said to be free of desire, aversion and illusion, to have a mind free of misbelief, to be composed in spirit. He is said to have crossed to the other side, to have penetrated deeply, to have attained peace. (Sprung 1979, p. 222)

They, too, are concerned to develop skeptical problems and skeptical solutions thereto regarding the existence of the external world, personal identity, and the existence of the self, morality, and meaning. And the arguments are immediately accessible and familiar to Western philosophers.

But the Buddhist skeptics, because of the cultural and philosophical context in which they write, are a bit more explicit about certain features of the skeptical method than are their European counterparts. In particular, the theory of the relation of skeptical positions to dogmatic positions is more carefully worked out; the nature of the suspension of belief or “positionlessness” is more explicitly characterized; and the relation between skeptical methodology and the role of convention in the life of the skeptic is more apparent in these accounts. There are numerous other interesting points of similarity and difference between the traditions, but I want to trade on these three expository advantages in order to use the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika formulation of skepticism to motivate and to illuminate certain obscurities in the skepticism of Europe. This is an essay with a complex agenda. I hope to provide a useful reinterpretation of classical skepticism as a constructive philosophical programme, and one which provides a compelling picture of the nature of the philosophical enterprise. I also hope to demonstrate the possibility and desirability of discussing European and Buddhist skeptical arguments together, as a vehicle for their mutual illumination. Finally, I hope to defend the skeptical enterprise as a much-needed corrective to some contemporary philosophical confusions. This is too large a task to accomplish

in a single essay, and the discussion must accordingly be regarded as a programmatic beginning.

After undertaking a cross-cultural expository defense of skepticism as a moderate solution to the problems attendant on metaphysical extremism, I will undertake a bit of therapy. For much of contemporary philosophy, I would argue, is seriously and dogmatically ill. One physician on one housecall, however, can cure only one patient. I will endeavor to cure a prominently diseased dogmatist, Jerry Fodor, of one of the more epidemic dogmatic ills—that of causal realism, by a judicious application of the skeptical physic. My hope is that this cure will serve as a model, and that its ease will inspire much self-treatment.

I

The Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika Buddhists,¹ like Sextus, refer to their opponents as “dogmatists.” They identify, for each philosophical problem subject to skeptical treatment, a reificationist and a nihilistic version of dogmatism. This taxonomy of the relevant pathology is important. For while it will be clear that, for example, both Sextus and Wittgenstein have both extreme views in mind, the failure in the European formulation of skeptical arguments to be explicit on this distinction issues in the easy and dangerous conflation of skepticism with nihilism, and the attendant disparagement and rejection of skepticism. Whereas reificationism, in this philosophical taxonomy, is the assertion of the ultimate reality of that whose reality (or reality in that sense) the skeptic denies (for example, of material substance, of a persistent self, of an independent realm of mathematical or moral truth, of a “third world” of meanings or of primitive semantic facts), nihilism is the philosophical denial of the existence of that which—at least in some sense—clearly exists, or more accurately of the warrant of what are in fact clearly warranted claims. A nihilist hence might deny that any of our statements about external objects, about ourselves or our moral responsibility, or about the meanings of words are true or warranted, or that one can make sense of any of the practices associated with such beliefs.

It is important to see that nihilism is a forensic device for skepticism: in the language of Hume, aptly appropriated by Kripke, the nihilistic challenges to our beliefs and practices pose “skeptical problems.” The task of the skeptic is to provide “skeptical solutions”—to respond to the nihilistic attack on the reality or warrant of a class of entities, beliefs, or practices in a way that at the same time does not capitulate to the metaphysical excesses of reificationism.

A *sceptical* solution of a sceptical philosophical problem begins . . . by conceding that the sceptic’s negative assertions are unanswerable. Nevertheless our ordinary practice or belief is justified because—contrary appearances notwithstanding—it need not require the justification the sceptic has shown to be untenable. And much of the value of the sceptical argument consists

precisely in the fact that he has shown that an ordinary practice, if it is to be defended at all, cannot be defended in a certain way. (Kripke 1982, pp. 66–67)

As Kripke points out in the context of his exposition of Wittgenstein's skeptical response to semantic nihilism,² this form of skeptical response typically consists in *granting* the principal arguments of the nihilist against the possibility of the *kind* of knowledge, certainty, justification, or entity the nihilist repudiates, but also in pointing out that in fact the practices the nihilist seeks to undermine are not in fact grounded on things of *that* kind, but are rather founded in conventions that remain untouched by nihilistic arguments and which in no way presuppose the reification of the entities whose existence is at issue between nihilist and reificationist. This is the sense in which skepticism constitutes a “middle way” or a moderate position.

A few quick examples whose details are familiar may help make this critical distinction between skepticism and nihilism and the relation between them clearer. Consider skepticism about the existence of the external world. The reificationist argues that since we apprehend qualities, there must be some material substance in which they inhere—that there is a substantial, independent external world, whose furniture consists in material substance and its attributes. The nihilist, on the other hand (perhaps Berkeley or a Yogācāra fellow-traveler³) argues that we can make no sense of the concept of such material substance or substratum, or that if we can, we can never have knowledge of it. So, s/he argues, there is no external world, or at least we have no knowledge of any such world.⁴

The skeptic—think of Hume (“that unintelligible chimera of a substance” (*Treatise*, p. 222)) or Nāgārjuna (“[47] Form is not apprehended as inherently existing”⁵ (Komito, p. 90)), or Candrakīrti (“You may say: Although a material cause of objects is in this way not logically possible, nonetheless objects exist in fact as effects and because of their real existence matter as cause will exist as well. This would be so if the object as effect existed, but it does not” (Sprung p. 99).)—concedes to the nihilist that we have no idea of material substance as a permanent substratum for attributes, or that if we had a concept of such a thing, we could never have knowledge of its existence. But the skeptic denies that our ordinary discourse about and use of material objects in any way implicates the concept of a substance with attributes. Instead, the skeptic argues, our conventions and practices regarding the use of, talk about, and justification of knowledge claims regarding external objects get their point just from their role in our individual and collective lives. It is these practices that give sense to talk about objects, and not the existence of substance that makes these practices intelligible.

Or consider skepticism with regard to the existence of the self. The reificationist (for example, Descartes or the typical Brahman) argues that experience presupposes a persistent self as its subject. The nihilist (Hume in setting

up the problem, or Sextus) argues that in virtue of the incoherence of such a notion, or in virtue of its unknowability, there can be no such self, or at least no self-knowledge. The skeptical reconstruction proceeds by noting that the self is, as Hume puts it, a “forensic” or, as Tsong Khapa puts it, a “conventional” concept. The identification and discussion of selves presupposes not a substance to which we have privileged access, but conventions regarding the applications of names, attribution of responsibility, and so forth.

Think of skepticism with regard to meaning. The reificationist (Frege, Old Testament Wittgenstein) argues that there are particular semantic facts which constitute or determine the meanings of words and which we grasp when we know word meaning. The semantic nihilist (Bhartrhari on some readings or Wittgenstein’s imaginary interlocutor in the New Testament) argues that there can be no such facts, or that we could never know them, and hence that there is nothing that constitutes the meaning or correct use of terms. The skeptical solution developed by Wittgenstein and Tsong Khapa concedes the lack of any such special semantic facts, but requires us to note that word meaning and the assertability of correctness regarding word use rest not upon such facts but upon a network of social conventions regarding word use.

Finally, consider for a moment the example with which I will be most centrally concerned below. The reificationist with regard to causation argues that the regularities we observe in nature are to be explained by a fundamental causal power that causes have to bring about their effects—a necessary connection. The nihilist argues that because we can have no clear idea of such a causal power or natural necessity, causal explanation is impossible. The skeptical solution to the problem thus poses regarding the possibility of scientific explanation—as Hume, Wittgenstein, Nāgārjuna, and Candrakīrti argue—is, rather than to understand regularity as vouchsafed by causation, to understand causal explanation as grounded in regularities.⁶

All of these examples, to be sure, are presented in telegraphic form. But I hope that they serve to illustrate the constructive response skepticism provides to the challenges posed by nihilistic critiques of reificationist positions. There is an important additional characteristic of the relationship between skepticism and the dogmatic extremes against which it is counterposed that warrants emphasis. And it is only by appreciating this feature of skepticism that we can understand the sense in which the skeptic can be claiming to “suspend belief” or to be “positionless.” To suspend belief in the sense Sextus⁷ has in mind is not to shrug one’s shoulders in indecision regarding competing claims. To understand suspension this way is to see skepticism as a wholly negative position. I want to emphasize the essentially *constructive* character of skeptical argument, however, and this requires a subtler understanding of suspension. To suspend judgment in this sense is to refuse to assent to a position, while refusing to assert its negation, since either assertion would commit one to a false or misleading metaphysical presupposition. To

suspend judgment is hence to refuse to enter into a misguided discourse. For the skeptic, European or Buddhist, both members of any dogmatic pair, despite their apparent antagonism, share some common metaphysical thesis as a presupposition of their respective positions. And it is in the rejection of this position—and in the consequent suspension of judgment regarding the opposing dogmatic positions—that skepticism consists.⁸ The dogmatic thesis in the case of the existence of the external world is that the existence of physical objects and the truth of claims about them presuppose the existence of material substance. With respect to the existence of the self, the thesis is that personal identity and self-knowledge are possible *iff* there is a persistent soul; with respect to meaning, it is that conditions for the correct use of words presuppose the existence and grasp of semantic facts. Finally, the causal reificationist and nihilist agree that causal explanation is possible only on the condition that the regularities it exploits are grounded in independent causal links. In each case, the reificationist and the nihilist differ only regarding whether the metaphysical presupposition in question is satisfied. The skeptic rejects the presupposition of the dispute.

The skeptical move in each case consists in rejecting exactly the thesis that the apparently diametrically opposed dogmatic positions share. That is what makes skepticism so radical, so deep, and so apparently nihilistic when viewed uncritically. For in each case, the thesis rejected is an unquestioned fundamental presupposition of much mainstream philosophical thought—“the decisive move in the conjuring trick.” In each case, however, the skeptic determines to argue that these shared fundamental metaphysical assumptions regarding the necessary ontological conditions of knowledge must be rejected in order to understand and explain epistemic practice.

When Sextus urges us to suspend belief, it is the metaphysical beliefs that lead to dogmatic opposition that he urges us to suspend, and the debates concerning them from which he urges us to absent ourselves. When he says “not more,” he urges that the external world is not more than what we observe, that personal identity is not more than an aggregation of experiences and capacities, that meaning is not more than convention, that causation is not more than regularity. Custom and the particular practices of the arts and sciences, he urges, yield all the knowledge, certainty, and justification we need in order to navigate the world, identify ourselves and others, speak intelligibly, and explain natural phenomena.

Now, we cannot be entirely inactive when it comes to the observances of everyday life. Therefore, while living undogmatically, we pay due regard to appearances. This observance of the requirements of everyday life seems to be fourfold, with the following particular heads: the guidance of nature, the compulsion of the feelings, the tradition of laws and customs, and the instruction of the arts. It is by the guidance of nature that we are naturally capable of sensation and thought. It is by the compulsion of the feelings that hunger leads us to food and thirst leads us to drink. It is by virtue of the tradition of

laws and customs that in everyday life we accept piety as good and impiety as evil. And it is by virtue of the instruction of the arts that we are not inactive in those arts which we employ. All these statements, however, we make without prejudice. (Hallie, p. 40)

This thought is echoed by Wittgenstein's observation that when we hit explanatory bedrock, we find not certain propositions, but practices:

204. Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, *i.e.* it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting* which lies at the bottom of the language game.

344. My *life* consists in my being content to accept many things. (*On Certainty*)

When the Mahāyānists argue that phenomena are all empty, the same insight is being expressed: material objects are devoid of substance in the metaphysician's sense; persons are empty of immaterial souls that persist through change; words are empty of special semantic facts that determine their meanings; and regularity in nature is empty of special causal powers that provide its underpinnings.

The constructive side to the skeptical enterprise has a characteristic strategy, a strategy involving two moves. In the first place, it involves what I like to call the "skeptical inversion" of the order of explanation: the nihilist challenges us to explain the apparently problematic by reference to what, according to the reificationist, should be the unproblematic, and argues that we cannot. The skeptic grants the force of this argument, but demonstrates that in fact the apparent *explanans*—or at least the forms of discourse involving vocabulary pertaining thereto—is what is problematic and obscure. Moreover, s/he argues, the very reality—such as it is—of that *explanans* is in fact grounded in what was originally problematized by the skeptical challenge. This is a highly abstract characterization. Recalling a few familiar examples should clarify the point. Hume accepts that we can never explain the regularity of nature by appeal to a causal link, and inverts the order of explanation by arguing that our talk about causation is to be explained by our familiarity with regularities. Nāgārjuna makes the same move. Wittgenstein and Tsong Khapa grant that the ability of a community of language users to use words in roughly the same way cannot be explained by the private grasping by each member of the community of the meanings of words, and invert the order of explanation, arguing that the possibility of an individual using a word meaningfully is to be explained by reference to the regularity of practices in the community. Sextus, Hume, and Nāgārjuna argue that our conventions regarding the identification of persons are not to be understood as grounded in the reference of each person's "I" to a particular enduring mental substance; rather the talk of myself as an individual (and of others as

individuals) is explained by reference to our conventions of personal individuation, conventions that are, as Hume notes, “forensic” in character.

The second characteristic of the skeptical inversion, as should now be obvious from this brief survey of examples, is that an appeal to social conventions is central to the skeptical reconstruction of our heretofore metaphysically or epistemologically confused discourse. In the private-language case this is obvious. It should also be clear in the case of personal identity and in that of the skeptical reconstruction of morality. Though Hume and Sextus are less explicit on this point, Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Tsong Khapa emphasize—and Hume and Sextus would undoubtedly agree—social convention is also hard at work in skeptical reconstructions of discourse about the existence of physical objects and causation. For the boundaries of physical objects are not given by nature, nor are the classes of events that count as “of the same type” that underlie the generalizations that vouchsafe the attributions of explanatory significance involving words like “because.” The canonizations of sortals and of object-boundaries drawn in space, time, and composition require social and linguistic conventions. Tsong Khapa puts the point this way:

. . . [I]n presenting “earth” and “hardness” as referent and identity, it cannot be done by establishing them as the discovered object of the . . . analytic quest for the designative bases of the conventional terms used for identified referent and identity, as such things can only be presented as existent in terms of their mutual relations. . . .

.....

The Dialecticist accepts [philosophical] analysis as analysis of something’s possession or lack of ultimate status, [asserting that] existents are merely nominal, symbolic, and conventional. “Mere nominality” means . . . the undiscoverability of anything through investigation into the meanings of conventional expressions, and does not mean that names exist and things do not, or that there is nothing which is not a name. Finally, although they do not accept everything proposed by the verbally ascriptive conventional intellect as conventionally existent, neither do they accept any conventional things somehow not posited by conventionally ascriptive intellect. (Thurman 1984, pp. 295–296)

When the skeptic follows the custom of his or her country and participates in its linguistic conventions in asserting the existence of material objects, s/he does so in the recognition that it is these linguistic, explanatory, and allied conventions that justify such talk, rather than as a consequence of a belief in the givenness of objects as independent entities or in the givenness of sortals as naturally determined. And, in particular, the conception of objects as substances and their properties as essential or accidental attributes inherent in them is rejected by the skeptic as it is by the nihilist. But the skeptic rejects this conception with the realization—not shared by the reificationist who is the nihilist’s target—that none of our ordinary epistemic or social practices regarding material objects presuppose such a view anyway.

All of this allows us to characterize more explicitly the paradoxical skeptical recommendations of equipoise (Sextus: “to come first of all to a suspension of judgement and then to mental tranquility” (Hallie, p. 33), or “‘All things are false’, for example, asserts its own falsity together with that of all other things . . .” (p. 36)), or positionlessness (Tsong Khapa: “[I]f I had any position, then there would arise that fault for me’ . . . applies to whoever has a definite position, but since I have no position there is no fault for me” (Thurman, p. 331)). These recommendations are often regarded as paradoxical, because they at least appear themselves to be assertions of the kind that the skeptic rejects, or to constitute positions of the kind the Māhāyanist refuses to adopt. But closer inspection should indicate that they are not so, and Sextus’ metaphor of the laxative that purges itself together with the ill it aims at curing can be as useful here.⁹ The ills that skepticism aims to cure are philosophical ills—specifically metaphysical and epistemological ills characterized by the obsessive search for epistemologically or ontologically primitive foundations for knowledge, meaning, explanation, or morality that undergird our collective epistemic, linguistic, scientific, and moral practices. The *positions* the skeptic is concerned to undermine are specifically philosophical positions.¹⁰ They are positions regarding the necessary or sufficient underpinnings of what the skeptic wants to reveal as practices that stand in need of no grounding in independent matters of fact. The skeptic does not reject these practices. On the contrary, Sextus recommends exactly that we follow nature, feeling, custom, and the instruction of the arts, and Nāgārjuna explains that

[71] It is known in the way of the world that “this arises in dependence on that.” Such statements are not refuted. But whatsoever arises dependently does not exist inherently, and how can that non-inherent existence itself have inherent existence? In fact, that non-inherent existence must definitely not exist inherently! (Komito, p. 95)

That is, to understand the conventional *as conventional*, and as empty of any reality or foundation beyond convention, is the goal of philosophical inquiry. Consider this remark of Tsong Khapa:

. . . [Prāsaṅgika] teaching is declared for the sake of dispelling the mental habits of reification and repudiation that prevent access to the ultimate—repudiation of the superficial reality of things, and reification of the existence of things that are supposedly permanent yet that do not exist conventionally, and of the ultimate existence of form, *etc.* . . . as they appear. Repudiation is avoided by the refutation of the literalness of statements of non-production by demonstration that such statements are made in terms of the ultimate, and further by establishment of the need for accepting the existence of production and cessation conventionally. (Thurman, pp. 277–278)

The pill is skeptical inquiry. But when the poison is purged, the inquiry is no longer necessary. The inquiry does not involve adopting one or the other of the disputing dogmatic positions, but rather involves making peace by reject-

ing both—and not in favor of a third dogmatism, but rather in favor of not seeking the chimerical foundations that get the dispute going in the first place.

It is this sense that all skeptical philosophers from Sextus and the historical Buddha to Wittgenstein and contemporary Māhāyanists have regarded skeptical philosophy as a form of therapy: the goal is not simply the search for truth for its own sake, or the critical appraisal of arguments, or intellectual entertainment. The goal is to cure the philosopher of the confusion attendant upon the fundamental misconceptions underlying dogmatism—that underlying any reasonable practice must be some set of certain propositions, and that underlying those propositions must be some convention-independent, ontologically given reality. Such misconceptions engender endless sophistical dialectic and block clear thinking about language, explanation, morality, and ontology. The skeptic endeavors to replace such dogmatic impediments to understanding not with an alternative theory about the chimerical substratum of our practices but rather with a contentment with those practices on their own terms, and with their conventional status.

341. That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

343. But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (*On Certainty*)

II

All of this would be beside the point if philosophical dogmatisms were merely diseases of a remote past, or if they were merely benign philosophical play-things. But dogmatisms in many forms are alive and well, and are, in fact, wreaking philosophical havoc. In order to recommend the skeptical purgative, I will consider one contemporary case of the reificationist infection and attempt to effect a skeptical cure. The variety of the disease I have in mind is causal reificationism, a disease one might have thought to have been stamped out by the Humean vaccine. But it is still with us, and gives rise to much needless confusion in the philosophical foundations of cognitive science, among other places. I will articulate its consequences in Fodor's hands, and demonstrate that a careful skeptical analysis frees cognitive science from artificial dogmatic methodological bonds.

Fodor, in *Psychosemantics*, attempts to demonstrate that *all* scientific taxonomy is individualistic—that science never does, and must never, identify phenomena for theoretical purposes *qua* relational, because all such taxonomy is dependent upon the causal powers of the phenomena to be clas-

sified, and because causal powers are always local. This claim is important and controversial, for as many (Garfield 1988, Milikan 1987, Burge 1979, Baker 1988, and others) have argued, psychology often at least apparently *does* individuate phenomena in its domain relationally. In particular, phenomena such as the propositional attitudes are arguably relational and are arguably essential to much psychological explanation.

This is also metaphysically rich stuff—the stuff of dogmatic reificationism with respect to causation. I will argue that while scientific—including psychological—taxonomy must cleave nature at causally relevant joints, there is good empirical reason to believe that the resulting cuts are often relational, and no good metaphysical reason to believe that they can't be. Moreover, and most importantly for disarming this new realism about causation, nothing in causal individuation requires one to discover any *causal powers* that things *have*. Explanation does not require such an occult metaphysics. And once we appreciate the force of this conclusion, psychological, intentional causal relations between naturalistically¹¹ characterized relata have as much claim to reality as any microphysical causal relations linking individualistically characterized phenomena.

I will begin by rehearsing Fodor's argument in some detail, explaining just how and where its bizarre metaphysical commitments enter. Once the argument is clearly in view, I will argue directly for its unsoundness, and present an alternative, more moderate skeptical account of the nature of causation, and of the nature of causal taxonomy in cognitive science inspired by Nāgārjuna, Sextus, and Hume. After considering and dismissing some possible Fodorian replies, I will conclude with some general morals of this discussion for practice in cognitive science.

Fodor's initial argument proceeds as follows:

(1) We want science to give causal explanations to such things . . . as can be causally explained. (P. 34)

(2) Giving such explanations essentially involves projecting and confirming causal generalizations. And causal generalizations subsume the things they apply to in virtue of the causal properties of the things they apply to. (P. 34)

(3) *And . . . [consider] the property of being a mental state of a person who lives in a world where there is XYZ rather than H₂O in the puddles* [as opposed to being that of a person who lives in an H₂O world]. These sorts of differences in the relational properties of psychological (/brain/particle) states are irrelevant to their causal powers; hence irrelevant to scientific taxonomy.

. . . [I]f you're interested in causal explanation, it would be mad to distinguish between Oscar's brain states and Oscar₂'s; their brain states have identical causal powers. That's why we individuate brain states individualistically. And if you're interested in causal explanation, it would be mad to distinguish between Oscar's *mental* states and Oscar₂'s; their mental states have identical causal powers. (P. 34)

(4) So, [relational] taxonomy won't do for the purposes of psychology. Q.E.D. . . . It's true that when I say "water" I get water and when my Twin says "water" he gets XYZ. But that's irrelevant to the question about identity of causal powers, *because these utterances (/thoughts) are being imagined to*

occur in different contexts. . . . What *is* relevant to the question of identity of causal powers is the following pair of counterfactuals: (a) If his utterance (/thought) had occurred in my context, it *would have had* the effects that his utterance (/thought) did have; and (b) if my utterance (/thought) had occurred in his context it *would have had* the effects that my utterance (/thought) did have. For our utterances (/thoughts) to have the same causal powers, both of those counterfactuals have to be true. But both of those counterfactuals *are* true. . . . (Pp. 34–35)

Fodor then brings this all together:

So, then, to bring this all together: you can affect the relational properties of things in all sorts of ways—including by stipulation. But for one thing to affect the causal powers of another, there must be a mediating law or mechanism. It's a mystery what this could be in the Twin (Oscar) cases; not surprisingly, since it's surely plausible that the only mechanisms that *can* mediate environmental effects on the causal powers of mental states are neurological. The way to avoid making this mystery is to count the mental states—and, *mutatis mutandis*, the behaviors—of Twins (Oscars) as having the same causal powers, hence as taxonomically identical. (P. 41)

So here's Fodor's position: we individuate phenomena by reference to their causal powers. Causation is local in the case of psychological phenomena, so psychological taxonomy must be individualistic. Individualistic psychological taxonomy identifies psychological phenomena with neurological phenomena. So, in order for psychological explanations to be causal, and hence scientific, psychological phenomena must be individualistic in character. And this is just because for Fodor causal explanations must carve nature at her joints by characterizing explanans and explananda under sortals that capture phenomena which in fact have genuine *causal powers*—the ability to bring about effects of the right kind or to be brought about by causes of the right kind—powers that inhere in precisely those phenomena.

III

No existents whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from themselves, from another, from both, or from a non-cause. (1)
(That is, there are no *sui generis* phenomena, nor any power by means of which one event or state can *bring about* another. Nor can any such power be found in any combination of phenomena or in some non-natural arena.)

The self-nature of existents is not evident in the conditions, *etc.* . . . In the absences of self-nature, other-nature too is not evident. (3)
(Natural phenomena have no essences independent of their place in the network of explanatory relationships and regularities in which they occur, and there is no privileged ontological scheme.)

Activity is not constituted of conditions nor is it not non-constituted of conditions. Conditions are neither constituted nor non-constituted. (4)
(The explanatorily useful relations phenomena bear to one another—natural regularities—are not, when conceived clearly, due to any independently present *power*. Ontology depends upon explanatory interests.)

These are conditions, because depending upon them these others arise. . . . (5) (Nāgārjuna, *Kārikā*, trans. Kalupahana)
(None of this is to say that there are not natural regularities that are usefully exploited in scientific explanation.)

In these famous (though obscure and diversely interpreted) opening verses of the *Kārikā*, Nāgārjuna defends a middle way between nihilism and strong realism with respect to causation. Against the nihilist he urges that there are natural regularities and that they can be and are exploited in explanation. Against the realist—who (with Fodor) is committed to a reification of such regularities in a cement-of-the-universe model of causation—he argues that natural regularities themselves lie at the base of explanation. The use of these regularities in explanations, Nāgārjuna argues, neither demands nor profits by the interposition of a force. For then cause and effect would each need to be individually connected to that force by. . . .¹²

This moderate skepticism about causation—which finds echo in Sextus and Hume and in the remarks of Wittgenstein quoted at the beginning of this paper—provides the key to understanding what is at bottom wrong with Fodor’s excessive causal realism. To begin with, consider the odd pair of conclusions concerning the predicates that are instances of *is a belief that p* and the predicate *is a planet: is a planet* counts, for Fodor, as a useful astronomical predicate despite its relational character because being a planet affects planets’ causal powers, namely, the power to bump or not into various things. Puzzlingly, having these causal powers is presumably supposed to be constant across counterfactual contexts in which the nonrelational properties of the planet are held constant—that is what makes this predicate, in Fodor’s mind, individualistic despite being at the same time relational. *Believes that there is water on Mars*, however, unless it can be identified with a local property of its bearer’s brain—unless it is nonrelational—fails to be individualistic, and hence fails to count as a scientifically useful predicate. For, as Twin-Earth examples show, when relationally individuated, its causal powers are not constant across counterfactual contexts.

But this putative distinction cannot be maintained. The causal powers of Uranus are not constant across counterfactual contexts. Consider the world where it orbits a sun with a different mass, or is a different distance from Neptune. There, of course, its trajectory differs, and so, then, does that of what it might or might not bump into. There is no principled respect in which this variability in powers differs from that of inscriptions, or, if Burge, Baker, and I are right, of individualistically described psychological states. They, too, have different causal powers in different counterfactual circumstances. The only difference is that in these cases, it is not the variation of mass of nearby astronomical bodies that issues in covariation in trajectory, but rather the variation in social conventions and behaviorally relevant environment that issues in covariation in semantic character, in the conditions under which

they would be uttered, and in their probable consequences—hence in the psychological or linguistic type of significant tokens. And to suggest that the descriptive vocabulary appropriate to describing these properties and the variations therein is ruled out a priori is groundlessly to beg the question at issue. Why not rule out trajectory talk? Just as the latter is essential to practice in astrophysics, the former is essential to practice in cognitive science.

Fodor might object at this point that in each of these pairs of cases something is constant—the physical counterfactual dispositions of the planets on the one hand and of the twins on the other. And the fact that these physical dispositions remain constant across counterfactual contexts privileges the physical vocabulary for scientific purposes. But there are at least two things wrong with this reply. First, as I noted above, it begs the question against the claim that intentional predicates are as appropriate to psychology as non-intentional ones are to astronomy, and that the intentional properties of the twins differ. Second, it betrays an unmotivated natural essentialism. For asserting in this context that what makes a rock the object that it is for any and all scientific purposes are just its individualistic properties is to plump for a particular set of predicates as constituting a necessary description of it, regardless of one's descriptive or explanatory purposes. And how would one defend such metaphysical extravagance? (A bit later on I will consider some slightly more sophisticated forms of this Fodorian objection.)

The source of the error has yet to be identified and examined. And here is where Nāgārjuna's insight can be pressed into service. Nāgārjuna pointed out, as Hume would some sixteen centuries later, that while regularities are to be found in nature, and while explanation must exploit regularities, appeal to some occult causal nexus joining explanans to explanandum, or predecessor event to successor event is both otiose and ultimately incoherent. But it is this misguided, unreflective image of such a "cement of the universe" that holds the natural order together, and at that in very thin mortar-joints, that underlies causal reificationism. There are, of course, as Nāgārjuna insists, *conditions*—explanatorily necessary and/or sufficient conditions of explananda (and moreover lots of types of them, as everybody (except for Hempel and a few others) from Aristotle to Pylyshyn has emphasized). We explain—correctly—the ignition of the match by its striking in the presence of oxygen, my dialing 911 by reference to my desire to get help, and the clicking on of the thermostat by reference to its regulatory function. And explanation presupposes both regularity and the possibility of describing explanans and explanandum in the vocabulary in which these regularities are properly expressed. But that is all that is presupposed. It is no set of individualistic facts about the individual match, its striking, and its ignition at a particular time that constitutes the fact that the striking caused the ignition. Rather it is the regularity of such successions that makes it appropriate to say that *this* striking *so described* caused *this* ignition *so described*.

The addition of *causation* or a *causal power* in the “cause” or of *effectual potential* in the “effect” is unwarranted, unnecessary, and explanatorily impotent: it is unwarranted because there can be no evidence for such a mysterious, occult causal link. There is plenty of evidence for the occurrences of the phenomena putatively so linked, and in the right cases there may be plenty of inductive or theoretical evidence for the regularity of their association. But no such evidence can be even relevant to some mysterious necessity—some unknown force or glue—beyond what can be observed or measured. Moreover, explanation proceeds quite smoothly, as does prediction, in the absence of any such causal glue.¹³ And this is the central point: our natural laws, functional generalizations, structural explanations, and narratives provide coherence and intelligibility without interpolating causal glue or ascribing any modal powers to the phenomena they subsume. And even if we did add the cement, the regressive problem would remain: what empowers causes to generate causal power, and what enables causal power to bring about effects?¹⁴

Once we replace Fodor’s loose, metaphysically luxurious talk about causal powers with more commonsense and methodologically sound—that is to say, skeptical—talk about explanatorily useful regularities, the central methodological project underwritten by this metaphysical currency collapses. For it was the claim that causal powers inhere in an individual object in virtue of its particular natural type (leaving aside the incoherence of Fodor’s account of what constitutes an appropriate natural type) that lay behind the claim that scientific individuation must be individualistic. And if I am right, the obscure and unacknowledged image of causation as a kind of immaterial superglue that can bond only adjacent surfaces of natural kinds is what lies behind the (undefended—presumably obvious) assertion that causal powers are possessed only by individualistically characterized individuals.

But such grand causal realism is incoherent. Regularity is as real as connection gets, and subsumability under explanatorily useful regularities is as real as a natural kind gets. But here is the point: there is nothing about regular association in any of its forms that demands spatiotemporal locality of the regularly associated phenomena. And there is nothing, at least nothing obvious, that blocks their relational individuation. In a particular domain the truth or falsity of individualism or naturalism would hence appear to be an empirical matter. And given the irreducibility that Fodor acknowledges to obtain generally between the vocabularies of the “special sciences,” there is no reason to feel queasy about an individualistic ontology in a science of the interior of, say, a person whose behavior *in situ* is best explained by subsumption under regularities captured by a vocabulary that individuates that person’s states relationally.

This is, of course, but a case study, and its implications must be treated with appropriate caution. But this much, I think, emerges: reificationism with re-

gard to causation is not philosophically benign. It issues in a commitment a priori to an ontologically radical and methodologically restrictive vision of the nature of mind and of cognitive science. This vision and its attendant strictures on the conduct of science and the construction of theories are seen to be gratuitous when subjected to the constructive critical analysis suggested by skepticism with respect to causation. Such an analysis does not undermine the possibility of psychology or our faith in its explanations. Rather it facilitates a more naturalistically conceived theoretical posture in that discipline—one that corresponds more closely to actual practice.

IV

I can imagine discomfort with this skeptical view. The hyperrealist metaphysics of causation I have been attacking is indeed well entrenched. So I will consider several plausible replies.

The reply that Fodor implicitly endorses is what might be called “the argument from the unity of science” or perhaps the argument from physics. It goes something like this: The laws of the special sciences are not properly laws at all—they are rough generalizations that demand copious, ineliminable *ceteris paribus* clauses. What underlies their verisimilitude is the truth of closed, exceptionless, *really* true laws—the laws of the millennial physics. But the laws of physics employ an individualistic taxonomy. So, insofar as a special science generalization is true, it too must employ an individualistic taxonomy. Chemistry, physiology, and neuroscience promise reduction and hence their own volumes in the *Encyclopaedia of Unified Science* (Fodor 1991?) just because their individuation schemes promise, when suitably refined, to coincide with that of physics. But if psychology recognizes naturalistically individuated phenomena, and seeks generalizations that subsume them, it does so at the cost of a gerrymander of the natural world that will forever condemn it to theoretical excommunication.

This argument has a certain nostalgic power, but, I fear, there is not much else going for it. To note two salient difficulties: There is no reason to believe that explanatory utility and reducibility to physics go hand in hand. Good economics is possible even despite variations in media of exchange, and good linguistics does not presuppose that larynxes, ink, chalk, and other media of expression share any essential physical properties. (A more sober and careful argument for this point is to be found in Garfield (1988).) More significant, though, and closer to the heart of my difficulty with Fodor’s position is this: the laws of physics—even the best laws of the best physics—are fraught with *ceteris paribus* clauses. They are not (as Cartwright (1978) has so eloquently argued) true of any actual physical phenomena. Nor are scientific laws meant to be. Laws of nature are true only of ideal types, and idealization is an ineliminable aspect of scientific explanation—the ground of the possibility of the universality to which they aspire. This is no less true of physical laws than

it is of psychological laws. So if the point of striving for an individualistic ontology is unity with physics, and if the point of that is the attainment of exceptionless truth when instantiated by actual empirical phenomena, the point is chimerical. And the source, I suspect, of this faith in the perfectibility of physical science is intuition that it is onto *causal powers*.¹⁵

A closely related reply concerns *forces*. After all, one might argue, physics does recognize causal powers. In fact it recognizes at present approximately four of them, or maybe three if the electroweak unification is successful. And if further unification occurs—the ultimate unification—we will have an account of the genuine causal power, the actual cement of the universe. This would be all well and good if physics characterized forces as powers that physical phenomena *have*, or as things that have *powers* over physical phenomena. But that's just not what they are. Forces represent dynamic relations between physical parameters. Period. They do not inhere in physical phenomena, nor do they exist independently of them, and act on them. Physicists seem to have read their Hume. Or their Nāgārjuna.¹⁶

A final argument can be anticipated, and this is the one that really betrays the metaphysics that Nāgārjuna, Hume, and Wittgenstein are concerned to debunk: regularities are cheap. Not all of them are explanatory. Take the regular coincidence of the noon whistle and the noon train, for example. In order for a regularity to be explanatory, what must underlie it is a *real causal link*—the *causal power of the cause to bring about the effect*. So, if there are explanatory regularities, and not mere cosmic coincidences, there must be causal powers. But here is where we must recall the powerful argument from the *Tractatus* with which I opened this paper. The addition of a causal cement between cause and effect can add nothing explanatory to an explanation. For one would still need (as noted in the Third Man argument offered above) an explanation of how the cause brought about the cement, and of how the cement brought about the effect. And as any good mason will tell you, adding an additional loose joint will do nothing to improve the bond. As Hume emphasized, it is regularities that vouchsafe individual attributions of causation, and networks of regularities that vouchsafe particular regularities. Counterfactuals are supported by confidence and success, and not by occult metaphysics. And as the skeptic—Buddhist or European—will be quick to emphasize, this amounts to the adoption of positionlessness as a guiding principle in the interpretation of scientific theories. We neither assert the existence of occult causal powers, nor do we deny the explanatory utility of our theories in virtue of their absence.¹⁷

Someone might well object at this point that any claim of skeptical cure is at least premature. For, it might be argued, the skeptic has not demonstrated that his/her account of causal discourse as grounded in regularity is devoid of metaphysical commitment. For one thing, the account so far is sketchy, and it might well turn out to involve non-obvious metaphysical commitments as it is

elaborated. And doesn't the skeptic owe us some account of why the practice of exploiting regularities in nature for the purposes of explanation is itself justified? There is a point to this objection, and the skeptical response illuminates the structure of the enterprise. It may indeed be that the skeptic unwittingly dogmatizes. But if s/he does, that fact will emerge and be treatable by subsequent skeptical therapy. Skeptical analysis may be interminable analysis. But that does not undermine its utility. (On the other hand, of course, it might well be—as it appears in this case—that the skeptic does not dogmatize, in which case the therapy is short-term.) And practices—including the broadest explanatory practices—are subject to criticism, and can often be justified or shown to be unjustified. But the justification of a practice does not necessarily consist in producing a set of true or indubitable sentences about the way the world is upon whose truth or certainty the practice rests. The justification of practices can often be simply pragmatic. They work; or that's the way we do things—if one wants to engage in *this enterprise*, one does it this way. Scientific explanation, and the identification of causes may be like that. So it in no way follows from the inability of the skeptic to produce decisive arguments for the truth of competing theories concerning causation, the nature of the physical world, or of the self, that the enterprise is bankrupt. The activity of producing such theories is just what the skeptic wants us to abandon. And if the skeptic is guilty of dogmatizing, that only shows that more analysis is required.

v

I conclude by drawing attention to the several skeptical morals of these discussions for metaphysics and method in science. None of these conclusions is new, but since all are called into question by what I think is a very popular dogmatic causal hyperrealism, it is worth repeating them in one place.

First, while it is certainly true that scientific taxonomy—including both those of physics and psychology—individuates phenomena in response to the demands of explanation, this does not in any way entail individualism. For, when stripped of incoherent and otiose metaphysical baggage, all that the phrase “causal powers” could ever indicate is *explanatorily useful relations*. And there is no good reason, once this rich metaphysics of causation is abandoned, to believe that such relations always comprise individualistically characterized relata. Moreover, the claim that the relational categories of physical science are somehow more individualistic than those of the special sciences, for example, cognitive science, is false. Naturalism is hence not simply a hallmark of special science, let alone *immature* cognitive science.

Second, reducibility to a more fundamental, or to a physical science—in particular reduction by demonstrating a token-identity relation between phenomena respected by the respective taxonomies of reduced and reducing science—is no prerequisite of respectability for cognitive sciences, or, for that

matter, of any science. The ground for the belief that it is is a belief in the special insight of physics into occult causal powers. But this belief is groundless, or at best is grounded on a mistaken mythology of the peculiar perfection of physical laws and a failure to recognize the central and universal role of idealization and *ceteris paribus* instantiation of ideal types in scientific explanation.

Third, a unitary, broadly physicalistic ontology is compatible with ontological pluralism at the level of the taxonomy of nature, and does not entail the unity of science, or even the unity of *good* science. One does not need to be some kind of Cartesian substance-pluralist to endorse the disunity of science.

Finally, and most importantly, the philosophy of science can do without any rich metaphysics of causation or causal powers. The superstition that, in order for an ontology to grip nature by the throat so as to carve her at the joints, it must first discover *real* relations between phenomena underwritten by *causal powers* as opposed to “mere” natural regularities is just that—a superstition. Explanatory regularities and the taxonomies they induce are plenty real enough—they are as real as it gets.

Moreover, I should emphasize that I have presented but a single case history. If the general thrust of the initial portion of my discussion is correct, there is an epidemic to be addressed, and many of us are victims. This is but one example of the cure that can be wrought by skeptical analysis. The cure may be difficult, and it may leave many of us profoundly dissatisfied with what we now take to be the goals and nature of philosophy, and with many of our own positions and arguments. Fortunately, however, skeptical medicine has one salient side effect: it is good philosophical fun. I hope that this provides encouragement for the view that the appropriate response to the skeptic is not to search for a reply but to take one’s medicine and wake up to regularity.

NOTES

1. From here on, for the sake of brevity, I use the term “Buddhists” to refer specifically to the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Those persons with whose work I will primarily be concerned are Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Tsong Khapa, all major figures of this school. Many of the arguments and the specific tenets I will discuss would not necessarily be endorsed or understood in the same way by philosophers in other schools of Buddhism.

2. Wittgenstein, of course, frequently denies that he is a skeptic: “Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but *obvious nonsense* . . .” (*Notebooks 1914–1916* p. 44). But I would argue that the position Wittgenstein denotes by “scepticism” is what I am calling here “nihilism.” The type of response Wittgenstein repeatedly offers to the skeptical problems posed by nihilistic arguments is characteristically skeptical.

3. At least as the Yogācāra are interpreted by Candrakīrti and Tsong Khapa. But the Prāsaṅgika accounts of Yogācāra may well be uncharitable, and the idealism imputed to them and attacked by the Prāsaṅgika may well be more extreme than any position the Yogācāra philosophers actually espouse. I take no position here on the correct resolution of the attendant hermeneutical disputes. In a similar vein, it may well be that a correct reading of Berkeley would

recognize his idealism as more Kantian and transcendental than that “dogmatic idealism” Kant and most others impute to him. But these questions of interpretation, too, are beyond the scope of this discussion.

4. Note that here I am lumping together ontological and epistemological claims. This is not to suggest that the rejection of the *existence* of the external world is the same as the rejection of *knowledge* of the external world. It is merely to remind us of the fact that historically the route to nihilistic ontological claims has often been through the assessment of the objects of putative knowledge.

5. There are real philosophical and interpretive problems regarding my interpretation of Nāgārjuna as indicating by “material form” something akin to what Hume disparages as “material substance.” This is not the place to defend this interpretation in detail, and in fact there are important differences between the ways substance and material form figure in their respective ontological positions. But these differences do not undermine the central claim that in the context of disputes concerning the reality and status of the material world, their respective conceptual roles are importantly analogous. It also should be noted in this context that Nāgārjuna in the stanzas just quoted and elsewhere in his corpus discusses the emptiness of material form as a single central example of the emptiness of phenomena quite generally. But again, this rhetorical role of the discussion of form leaves the comparative point undisturbed.

6. My reading of Nāgārjuna’s distinction between causes and conditions, and the account of causation and explanation I attribute to him is, I know, controversial; and Nāgārjuna’s remarks on these topics are cryptic enough to sustain a number of plausible competing interpretations. The view I attribute to Nāgārjuna (developed in more detail below), however, renders his account of causation, of the conditions, of the nature of explanation in the world of *samsara*, and of the ultimately empty nature of causation both compelling and remarkably similar in form to his more explicitly articulated views concerning the nature of self, of action, and of form. I acknowledge the somewhat tendentious character of the reading, and the fact that it is hard to see these theses explicitly asserted in the texts, but I stand by the cogency of the interpretation.

7. The Prāsaṅgika conception of suspension is very much the same. Compare with the discussion of nonduality in Book 9 of the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* (Thurman 1976).

8. There is hence a similarity here to Strawson’s account of refusing to assert either that the present king of France is bald or that he is not bald, in virtue of rejecting the common presupposition that the two alternatives share—the existence of a present king of France.

9. This metaphor also appears in the Buddhist literature, both in the early sūtras and in the later Mahāyāna literature. Candrakīrti quotes the Ratnakūṭa sūtra:

One for whom, in turn, the absence of being itself becomes a dogmatic view I call Incurable. It is, Kāśyapa, as if a sick man were given a medicine by a doctor, but that medicine, having removed his ills, was not itself expelled, but remained in the stomach. What do you think, Kāśyapa, will this man be freed of his sickness? No indeed, illustrious one, the sickness of this man in whose stomach the medicine, having removed all his ills remains and is not expelled, would be more violent. The illustrious one said: In this sense, Kāśyapa, the absence of being is the exhaustion of all dogmatic views. But the one for whom the absence of being itself becomes a fixed belief, I call incurable.

10. In fact, this point is rather complicated. For while, as Tsong Khapa argues, nihilism really is a philosopher’s view—one to which the vulgar are not readily susceptible (Berkeley, to the contrary, notwithstanding)—reificationism comes in two versions. We might call these, with Tsong Khapa, “ordinary” and “philosophical.” For arguably the person-on-the-street-thinks of the physical as substantial, thinks of causation as a real force, thinks of personal identity as grounded in a soul, and so forth. But these views are probably in the typical case rather inchoate. Philosophical reificationism can be seen as a careful conceptual refinement of this fallacy of everyday metaphysics. It is the job of the skeptic to cure both the ordinary and the sophisticated forms of the disease. The relative prevalence of reificationism as opposed to nihilism in the streets probably also lies behind the common confusion of skepticism with nihilism. For given this reificationist epidemic, the arguments the skeptic must most often muster are quasi-nihilistic in character, so as most effectively to undermine that dogma.

11. I use the term “naturalistic” to denote relational, or nonindividualistic properties or predicates. The relations in question may be either intentional or nonintentional. The contrast is with

individualistic properties or predicates—those which apply to their subjects irrespective of any relations they may bear to other things.

12. Again, I emphasize that this interpretation of Nāgārjuna on causation and explanation is not definitive, and the extension of his expressed views on ordinary explanation to a theory of scientific explanation must be regarded as highly tendentious.

13. Fodor never comes completely clean in expressing his commitment to this “cement of the universe” picture of causation. The view, however, emerges quite clearly both from the passages I have quoted above and others such as this: “Effects on causal powers require mediation by laws and/or mechanisms, and in the Twin cases there are no such mechanisms and no such laws.

“If you are inclined to doubt this, notice that for any causal relation that holds between my mental states and the local water puddles, there must be a corresponding relation that holds between my *neurological* states and the local water puddles. . . .” (157, n. 6 to p. 39).

And consider, “. . . [Y]ou *can't* affect the causal powers of a person's mental states without affecting his physiology” (p. 39).

But even without an explicit endorsement of this view (a view which even Fodor might acknowledge sounds crazy when explicitly stated) we can note that Fodor is committed to it inasmuch as, without it, there is no way to *begin* to make the strong locality argument about causation, or to draw the distinctions between *genuine* and *ersatz* causal relations Fodor is after.

14. This is, of course, a causal version of the “third man” argument.

15. Note, however, that the question regarding whether or not there are exceptionless natural laws (whatever account one gives of what a natural law is) is independent both of the question regarding individualism in the philosophy of science generally and that regarding individualism in psychology.

16. There is, as Lee Bowie has noted, another account of what physicists do: they posit particles as bearers of forces. But this is no comfort for the Fodorian causal realist. For the behavior of these particles, and the nature of their interactions with other fundamental particles are again characterized by more-or-less exceptionless regularities, and not by reference to the bonding powers of ghostly subatomic superglue.

17. Dick Garner and an anonymous reviewer each raise the following objections at this point: Sextus, they argue, is more circumspect regarding causal powers than I suggest, and in fact, they argue, I am downright dogmatic about causal powers in insisting on their superfluity in scientific explanation. For, they point out, in Sextus' chapter in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* on causation, he provides arguments both in support of the hypothesis that there are causes, and in support of the hypothesis that nothing causes anything, concluding “From this, then, we conclude finally that if plausibility attaches both to the arguments . . . [for and against the plausibility of the existence of causes] we must necessarily suspend judgement regarding the existence of cause. . . .” (Hallie, p. 116).

Admittedly, this is a strong exegetical case. But things are not so simple. Careful attention to the differences between the arguments in support of the causal hypothesis and those against it reveals an important methodological insight. The arguments *for* the existence of causation (ibid., p. 113) all hinge on one of two observations—the existence of natural regularities and our ability to exploit these regularities in explanation and prediction. *None of these arguments or observations is called into question in the succeeding discussion.* The arguments *against* the causal hypothesis all hinge either upon the conceptual connection between cause and effect or on the lack of evidence for the existence of any *tertium quid* between putative cause and putative effect. And each presupposes the relativity and explanatory utility of putative causes and putative effects, denying only the efficacy or occult link between them. *And none of these arguments is called into question.* When the two sides are put together carefully, we have an argument for the lack of any necessity to assert the existence of occult powers in order to vouchsafe the explanatory utility of regularities.

Moreover, there is nothing dogmatic about this position. What is at issue is the existence of causal powers. Neither Sextus nor I either assert or deny their *existence*. What we both deny is the need to posit them, and the view that they have any explanatory force. We suspend—as pointless—any judgment regarding them. But while doing so, we can accept the very scientific and explanatory practices the dogmatist thinks require the existence of causal powers.

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