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Skepticism and Indian philosophy

This article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I shall claim that, in spite of the Indian attention to caution and criticism, the Indian philosophical tradition lacks a thorough system of skepticism. I shall briefly indicate the nature of two influential Greek skeptical schools which had enduring effects in the history of Western philosophy, and shall explain why I believe India has not had such skeptical movements. The second part will contain a few words on the relation between knowledge and language, and its bearing on skepticism. This is important because some Indian philosophical schools are mystically oriented; they are unaffected by the thrust of the skeptic’s arguments. In the third part, I shall take up a few representative schools of Indian philosophy, and shall attempt to show how they would have reacted if exposed to the skeptic’s criticisms. This should also show the scope of the skeptic’s attack against the Indian schools.

In philosophical circles, a skeptic is one who questions and raises doubts about knowledge claims. However, the term ‘skeptic’ in Greek (skeptikos) stands for a person who performs a much wider range of activities: he is thoughtful, reflective, he examines, considers, and looks about carefully.1 In this broad and nontechnical sense of the term, a skeptic seems to embody the very model of a philosophical approach. The Indian philosophical tradition contained a similar broad approach of criticism and caution. The Nyāyasūtra of Gautama took the lead in laying down an elaborate account of methods meant for establishing conclusions with careful argumentation, and for avoiding dogmatism, error, and ambiguities.2 The Indian custom of meeting the objections raised by a hypothetical objector (pirvapakṣin) in the course of presenting one’s own view is just an example that the Indians welcomed contrasting points of view and were aware of their value.

However, skepticism as a philosophical view, in the form of systematic calling of knowledge claims into doubt, and not as doubts concerning traditional religious beliefs or other dogmas, nor in the broad nontechnical sense of being critical and speculative, did not develop in India. The Indians seldom doubted the possibility of attaining knowledge, either by intuitive, mystical means, or by other methods. The Vedic literature, exerting a tremendous influence on subsequent Indian thought, took it for granted that it is possible to know the real: it directed its attention to an elaboration of the nature of such knowledge and the ways of attaining it.

The first thorough challenge to the Vedic way of knowledge came with the rise of the three “heterodox” systems of the Cārvāka, Buddhism, and the Jain. Yet none of these schools denied the possibility of knowledge: they simply

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redefined its scope. The subsequent six Hindu systems of speculation took issue with these schools, and with each other, over a vast number of topics centrally related to knowledge, like, its means and content, its relation to language, etc. But again, no school went to the extent of holding a systematic view that one cannot know the real for certain.

Skepticism is an attack on the possibility of knowledge. The attack takes several forms and leads to conclusions ranging from a straightforward denial of the possibility of knowledge to a more cautious assessment, like, “On the basis of available evidence it cannot be concluded whether knowledge is possible—therefore we should suspend our judgment on this matter.” These positions on the possibility of knowledge found expression in the two Greek skeptical movements which had lasting effect on the Western philosophical tradition—the so-called Academic skepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades, and Pyrrhonism as known through the writings of Sextus Empiricus. I shall give a brief summary of these two views here, and then indicate why I think the Indian tradition did not have similar skeptical movements, and if it had, how the Indian schools would have reacted to them.

The Academic position of Carneades was developed mainly as a reaction to the Stoic view of the representative theory of perception. The Stoics held that in perception we are directly aware of the sense impressions of an object, but not the object itself, which lies beyond our apprehension. Our impressions, in the form of beliefs, are true if they correspond to the true nature of the object which causes them. According to the Stoics, we know the truth of such impressions if they are “so striking and clear as to compel assent.” Our knowledge originates in such impressions.

Carneades agreed with the Stoics that perception cannot occur without sensory impressions, but, unlike the Stoics, he held that such impressions are mental affectations through which the senses directly grasp the object. The impressions do not stand as “barriers,” preventing the perceiving subject from directly apprehending the object: rather, the impressions are transparent, so to speak. Now, in further disagreement with the Stoics, Carneades held that there is nothing in the impressions themselves which allows us to declare their veracity with justification, for, he pointed out, false impressions can be as clear and vivid, and compel our assent as much as the true impressions. Hence Carneades proposed a set of criteria which would give us grounds for justifying our impressions, expressed as beliefs, as true, even though the beliefs, in actuality, could be false. That is, Carneades made a distinction between criteria of truth which should justify our beliefs, and their truth conditions which make the beliefs true in terms of their exact correspondence with reality.

According to Carneades, the criteria vary, depending on situations, but usually they consist of (1) the “credibility” of the impressions, in terms of their conditions of occurrence, (2) their consistency with each other, and (3) their
pragmatic efficacy. The point to be noted is that in Carneades’ view there is no way we can absolutely be certain about the truth conditions of our beliefs, but nonetheless we can justify ourselves in holding them if they meet our criteria. Hence he concluded that it is impossible to have knowledge, but we can attain some degree of probability. True to the tradition of the Academy, Carneades believed that absolute certainty is a necessary condition of knowledge, and, in that, he agreed with the Stoics.

It seems that if a skeptic wants to avoid dogmatism in any form, the only course open to him is to suspend his judgment. For, by passing a categorical judgment that knowledge is impossible he makes a claim for all times, which is dogmatic. Also, by holding such a view about knowledge the skeptic gets into the problem of justifying how he knows his view to be true. Accordingly, the most prominent of all the Greek skeptics, the Pyrrhonists, did not pass judgment.

Pyrrhonic skepticism, as known through the writings of Sextus Empiricus, held that the skeptic, in his search for truth, finds himself in the midst of opposing claims and therefore is unable to decide: hence he suspends his judgment. For every claim there is, he finds another equally acceptable claim to the contrary, one balancing out the other. The Pyrrhonic skeptic does not aim to suspend his judgment regarding the possibility of knowledge, but rather, he finds himself in a position in which he does not have any choice but to stop drawing conclusions. Such a skeptic believes, like the Stoics, that we perceive the appearances of an object, but not the object itself. We can be certain about how a thing appears to us, but because appearances vary depending on the perceiver and the external conditions of perception, we do not have any conclusive evidence to believe in the actual nature of the object one way or the other. Therefore, the skeptic suspends his judgment about the possibility of knowledge.7

The Pyrrhonist’s method of not drawing conclusions in order to avoid dogmatizing is consistent with his being certain about how a thing appears to him, because the messages which convey these appearances do not make any knowledge claim,8 and further, the assent granted to such messages are involuntary.9 These messages are the sense statements and should be distinguished from the perceptual statements of the Academic skeptic. According to the latter, evidence for a perceptual statement is another perceptual statement, and both can be questioned, whereas for a Pyrrhonist, a sense statement is offered as an evidence for a perceptual statement and cannot be questioned. But because such sense statements, all equally persuasive, conflict with one another, the Pyrrhonist cannot arrive at a decision about the truth or falsity of perceptual statements.

Thus, Pyrrhonic skepticism is a radical, yet consistently thorough procedure. After its rediscovery in the sixteenth century, it has played a very prominent
role in European philosophy including its part in the basis of the Cartesian doubt. The empiricist and the phenomenalist movements of Europe were all, in part, a reaction to the questions raised by Pyrrhonism.10

A position, however radical, is not skeptical, unless it calls into doubt knowledge claims because of lack of conclusive evidence, as exemplified in the methods of the two Greek schools just considered. Indian tradition lacks skepticism in this sense: Indian "radicals," like the Buddha, the Cārvākas, or the Jains, in spite their severe to moderate criticisms of the Vedic dogmas and the Vedic way of knowledge, never doubted the possibility of knowing the "nature" of things. Let me explain this point with specific reference to the Cārvākas and the Jains.

The Cārvākas held that knowledge is possible, but it is strictly perceptual in nature, and, therefore, reveals only those things which are perceptible. Unlike the Stoic belief that knowledge is based on perception, which the Greek skeptics did not question, the Cārvākas believed that knowledge is perception. Accordingly, they maintained that we do not have any justification in believing in the existence of things we cannot perceive. Such a view is not skepticism. Some skeptics, for example, the Pyrrhonists, believed in the existence of sense data but were unsure whether they revealed the real nature of an object. The Cārvākas did not believe in sense data, as that would have implied that we never perceive an object but merely infer its existence. They believed that we directly perceive the object.

However, those skeptics who would agree with the Cārvākas on this point would nonetheless point out that the Cārvākas showed their dogmatism when they said that perception is a valid means of knowledge. Sometimes our perceptions are deceptive. To justify our claim that we know an object, then, we should be able to verify that our perception of the object is veridical. But the skeptic would triumphantly conclude that no less than all possible verifications, which are infinite in number, would provide conclusive evidence that our perception is veridical.

Even though the Cārvākas themselves raised the Humean "problem of induction" to show that inference is an unjustifiable source of knowledge, they would not accept such a procedure in the case of perception. For, if they did, they would have to conclude that even perception is not a valid means of knowledge, which would go against their basic position. Hence they were not skeptics; they neither denied the possibility of knowledge nor did they suspend their judgment on this matter.

Similarly, the Jain doctrine of syādvāda, or the view that no belief is more than partially true and therefore should be explicitly qualified as such, is not skepticism either, even though it comes close to the skeptics' motto that dogmatism in any form should be avoided. The Jains held that every judgment is meant for a particular context and can be true only in part. It needs a seven-fold predication, according to them, to describe truly the real nature of a thing.
in a given context. So, in effect, this view held that knowledge of reality is possible if we employ extreme caution; hence, this was not skepticism.

So, even though the Indian non-Vedic schools, like the Cārvāka and the Jain, launched strong criticisms on the existing dogmas of their time, epistemological or otherwise, they, in doing so, technically played the role of critics rather than that of skeptics. They questioned the epistemological positions of their rival schools but did not doubt the possibility of knowledge as such.

Like the Greeks, the Indians traditionally believed in a distinction between the real and the phenomenal, but unlike the Greeks, who assumed that experience grasps only the phenomenal whereas the real is known by reason, the Indians gave experience a much broader role. For them, both the real and the phenomenal are revealed in experience, of which there are two different types. Our knowledge of the real is a direct, intuitive experience which cannot be put into words, but the experience of the phenomenal can.

The rise of skepticism in Greece was due to the Stoic belief, apart from the tradition but evident in Aristotle, that knowledge is based on experience: the problem then was how to account for the knowledge of the real which experience cannot grasp, because, true to the Greek tradition, even the Stoics held that experience reveals only the appearance. The Stoic answer to this “problem” of knowledge was not accepted by the skeptics who pushed the case to its logical conclusion.

The Upanisadic belief that knowledge is based on experience, and that experience grasps both the real and the phenomenal, obviously did not lead to a “problem” of knowledge conducive to skepticism. The later mystical schools of both Hinduism and Buddhism continued the same tradition, in their own ways, and did not see any conflict regarding the possibility of knowledge. The heterodox philosophies of the Buddha, the Cārvākas, and the Jains, as well as the nonmystic, realistic Hindu schools like the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the Mīmāṁsā, broke away from the tradition by not accepting the distinction between the phenomenal and the real, but even in these cases no “crisis” of knowledge emerged.

The “liberation philosophies” of the Buddha and the Jains took it for granted that knowledge is possible by enlightened beings. The insights of such liberated beings, of course, cannot be vitiated by any error. But error is a definite possibility for the nonliberated beings in their quest for empirical knowledge. Hence, there cannot be absolute certainty that a cognition of a nonliberated being is true: but without such certainty, how can there be knowledge? It was noted earlier that questions like this prompted the Academic skeptic Carneades to conclude that knowledge is impossible, even though he also did not draw a distinction between the phenomenal and the real.

It is interesting to note that the Jains, in their doctrine of syādvāda, went to the extent of specifying conditions which were meant to ensure absolute certainty even in the empirical realm of ordinary people. The Cārvāka, the
Nyāya, and the Mīmāṁsā—the rest of the schools that did not believe in the Upaniṣadic distinction between the real and the phenomenal, and who were not so enthused with the prospect of liberation\(^{15}\)—held emphatically that knowledge of the real is possible for the nonliberated beings, and the Cārvāka, by accepting perception as the only valid means of knowledge, wanted to strengthen the case for certainty as much as possible. The Nyāya and the Mīmāṁsā, however, had a more moderate attitude toward knowledge: they did not want to reduce knowledge to mere perception, nor did they demand absolute theoretical certainty as a condition for knowledge.

Knowledge (pramāṇa) was understood in Indian philosophy as true cognition, unaccompanied by doubt. In the empirical realm, it is impossible to overcome complete theoretical doubt, but this did not lead to any skepticism in India. The Mīmāṁsakas held that knowledge is self-validating and should be accepted as such, unless it leads to some point which occasions doubt. The Naiyāyikas believed that a cognition by itself cannot be determined as true unless put to some practical test; however, such a test was not meant for guaranteeing absolute certainty.

Hence, the philosophical climate of India was not conducive to skepticism in the way it was in Greece. Indian philosophical schools invariably argued over the scope and means of knowledge, but never doubted its possibility. Most of the nonmystic schools in India would find in Greek skepticism either something they would not accept (for example, the existence of phenomena), or some demand which would be thought of as too unrealistic (for example, the demand for absolute certainty in the realm of empirical knowledge). The mystic schools of India, on the other hand, would find in the skeptics’ position a partial affirmation of their own view that to seek for truth one needs to go beyond the limitations of language-infected cognitions.\(^{16}\)

II

In the West, knowledge is understood, among other things as true belief, capable of being cast into language. The inseparable relation between knowledge and language has seldom been questioned in the Western tradition: accordingly, it has been observed, especially in the modern times, that the prospect of attaining knowledge depends, to a large extent, on a clear insight regarding the function and limitations of language. John Locke drew attention to this point in his Essay which generated, at least in part, the subsequent interest in philosophy of language in Europe and America. He wrote:

... [when] I began to examine the extent and certainty of our knowledge, I found it had so near a connexion with words that, unless their force and manner of signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently concerning knowledge ... [words] interpose themselves so much between our understandings and the truth which it would contemplate and apprehend that, like the medium through which visible objects
pass, their obscurity and disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our eyes and impose upon our understandings.17

Skepticism is out of place if no knowledge claim is made. Without such a claim, there is nothing to dispute about or doubt. Furthermore, a skeptic is also out of business if no relation between knowledge and language is asserted. Some philosophical schools in India claimed, for example, that knowledge consists of an insight into reality, the nature of which cannot be captured adequately in language. Hence, it is impossible to put such insight into beliefs: it is ineffable. A skeptic cannot take issue with such a mystical position.

Strictly speaking, a mystic cannot make a genuine knowledge claim; for, to claim that he knows something, he has to characterize what he knows. This the mystic cannot do. Hence, neither can the skeptic take issue with him. Loosely speaking, however, the mystic can make a knowledge claim to the effect that he knows something which he cannot put into words. But, again, this is not going to help the skeptic any more than the other alternative.

However, it is clear that even though a skeptic cannot challenge a mystic, he can at least suspend his judgment regarding the question whether mystical knowledge is possible. For, the skeptic might point out that it is dogmatic to accept other people’s reports on mere faith. But this suspension of judgment on the skeptic’s part should not undermine the mystic’s claim that mystical knowledge is possible. For, it is obvious that nothing could count as contrary to such a possibility. If, for example, a nonmystic stepped forward and claimed that mystical knowledge is not possible, this could not be regarded as an equally persuasive claim to the contrary, because, after all, his very claim proved that he was not a mystic. It would be dogmatic to accept a man’s claim on a topic he does not know anything about. But, the skeptic would never get somebody who knows about mystical experiences, that is, who is a mystic, to come forward and make a claim that mystical knowledge is impossible. That would be self-defeating.

So at most, the skeptic can suspend his own judgment about the possibility of mystical knowledge. When the skeptic insists that we should suspend our judgment as to whether it is possible to have knowledge of the external world, then he speaks for all, and if he is right, his point should be binding for all of us regardless of how we claim an object appears to us. But when the skeptic suspends his judgment about the possibility of mystical vision, he cannot thereby show that a mystic is dogmatic by not following his (the skeptic’s) procedure.

What this boils down to is that a skeptic cannot show that a mystic is dogmatic, because the mystic would not accept one essential assumption of the skeptic, which is that all knowledge is expressible through the medium of language, in the form of beliefs. It is not that the skeptic loses his point in his failure to show that the mystic is dogmatic, but rather that the skeptic cannot get into an argument with a mystic.
There are mystical schools in India, most notably the Advaita Vedānta and the Mādhyamika Buddhism, which would thus be unaffected by the presence of a thorough skepticism. The realistic schools of the Nyāya, the Jain, and the Prabhākara Māmāsā, even though they are not mystically oriented but believe that our knowledge of reality can adequately be expressed in words, would again be unperturbed in the face of the skeptic’s challenge, because they do not believe with the skeptic that the reality somehow lies beyond the realm of appearance. Further, the Naiyāyikas and the Māmāsakas are the so-called fallibilists and would not accept the skeptic’s thesis that we should suspend our judgment about the possibility of knowledge, or deny such possibility, simply for the lack of “conclusive” evidence.

### III

In this section, I shall first take up the Yogācāra Buddhism and the Sāmkhya-Yoga for some brief remarks, and then proceed to analyze the possible response to skepticism from the Advaita Vedānta and the Nyāya points of view, taking these two systems as representative of the mystic and the nonmystic schools, respectively.

**Yogācāra Buddhism and the Sāmkhya-Yoga**

The Yogācāra idealists believed that the consciousness-moments (ksaṇas), which are unique particulars, are the only things real. These kṣaṇas can only be directly perceived by a form of indeterminate (nirvikalpaka) perception without the medium of language. The determinate (savikalpaka) perceptions of ours, which are expressible in language, on the other hand, are by nature erroneous; they never grasp the real as it is. It seems that such a position has something strange about it: the immediate unconceptualized awareness, which grasps the bare particulars without generalization or without relating them to each other, is the only valid source of knowledge (pramāṇa), even though it does not give us any idea of its contents (which will require some form of conceptualization), whereas the determinate perceptions which help us comprehend things and make us get by in this world are by nature erroneous!

However, the Buddhists also accepted inference (anumāna) as a valid source of knowledge, but in view of the basic Yogācāra position laid down earlier, it is hard to think of a good reason which would deny pramāṇa-hood to savikalpaka perception because of its contamination with language, and yet would bestow such a status to inference which is by nature associated with concepts and language. Perhaps in such a move the desperation of the Buddhist idealists shows through — this was their way of striking a balance between veridical cognitions which are uninformative and informative cognitions which are erroneous. Needless to say, such a move on the part of the Buddhist idealists, even though undertaken with much ingenuity, raised more questions than it resolved. The following observation is, in part, what Potter had in mind on
such an attempted compromise by one Yogācāra philosopher, Dharmakīrti:

What I suspect is really on Dharmakīrti’s mind is the desire to establish, within Buddhist assumptions and without going to the extremes of Mādhyamika, the possibility of knowing things immediately as they really are without language distorting or veiling their nature. Since this immediate awareness should reveal things as they actually are, he postulates that immediate awareness is a *pramāṇa*—and then finds himself in a position which is difficult to distinguish from a Čārvaka-like skepticism or Nāgārjuna-like mysticism. In order to avoid that outcome, he postulates that inference, too, is *pramāṇa*—and then searches out some criterion which will hopefully justify both of them as *pramāṇas* without undermining the guiding assumptions about language and thought. The result is unsatisfactory.21

The epistemological realism of the Śāmkhya-Yoga was another, but much better, attempt to draw a link between the unconceptualized, direct insight into the real and the conceptualized, language-mediated cognition of the ordinary man. The Śāmkhya-Yoga held that determinate perception, together with inference and verbal authority, are valid sources of knowledge. Determinate perception involves conceptual construction, but, according to the Śāmkhya-Yoga, even though construction by itself is not a valid means of knowledge, an element of it present in perception (as well as in inference and verbal testimony) does not *ipso facto* make it erroneous. But because of such presence of construction in the three *pramāṇas*, they do not lead to liberation either. Following the Yoga analysis along this line, as found in the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali and the commentaries thereof by Vyāsa and Vācaspāti Miśra, Potter thought that the Yoga22 bias for immediate awareness, which reveals its object as it is without the medium of language, becomes obvious.23

The Yoga school held, in tune with their doctrinal emphasis on liberation which is a state of pure undifferentiated consciousness of the *Puruṣa* in its isolated glory, that an extraordinary person, like a Yojina, on his way to the attainment of such a state can become vividly aware of an object as it really is without any element of construction (*vikalpa*) involved.24 This awareness is a state of *samāpatti*, either *nirvitarka* or *nirvicāra*, depending on whether the object in question is gross or subtle. Either way, the object is a bare particular without any general properties imposed on it, and in this respect it is unlike the content of a determinate perception, which is a “thing-of-a-kind,” because such perception involves an element of construction.25

However, this Yoga attempt to establish the possibility of direct awareness free from construction was “modified,” because, according to Potter, this awareness is said to be “achieved *after* constructions—involving language and thought—have had their way, not prior to them.”26 Further, the Yoga philosophers did not hold that this “higher perception” (*param pratyakṣa*), even though made possible independently of language, should have to remain totally exclusive by being incommunicable through language. In fact, the Yoga commentators Vyāsa and Vācaspāti Miśra explicitly stated that this higher percep-
tion is the "seed" (bija) of both inference and verbal testimony, in the sense that a yogin, having had this perception himself, casts it in language and conveys it to the ordinary people.\(^\text{27}\)

Nonetheless, in spite of such an earnest attempt at what Potter calls "modified linguaphobism,"\(^\text{28}\) the Yoga philosophy, along with the Śāmkhya, remained unsatisfactory on this point. Potter reflects such dissatisfaction on the critic's part when he asks: "How can the yogins know the properties (thatness) of an object by a perception free of constructions? Is it not an unresolved mystery that inference and linguistic knowledge have their being from nirvātarka awareness?"\(^\text{29}\)

The purpose of the foregoing analysis of the Yogācāra Buddhism and the Śāmkhya-Yoga is to show that the attempts by these schools to bridge the gulf between mystical intuition and language-oriented cognition led them to some serious inadequacies. The answer to the question of whether knowledge is possible in these systems is an obvious 'yes'; but aside from that, much remains vague. It is not clear how the schools would stipulate the criteria and conditions of truth without getting into inconsistencies, or whether knowledge is to be understood in these philosophies in terms of beliefs or mystical intuition. Hence it is a critic's task, not a skeptic's, to raise these issues and to find out the exact positions of these schools before the impact of skepticism on their views can even be considered.

THE ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

The mysticism of the Advaita Vedānta did not pervade every aspect of its philosophy; in fact, this school showed a surprising sensitivity toward the ordinary point of view. For example, it believed in the possibility of empirical knowledge which can be expressed in language. The Advaitins held that our cognition of an object is veridical unless the object is negated or replaced by a different one in a later cognition. This happens when, for example, our effort to undertake action based on our cognition becomes futile.

Now, a skeptic would invariably make his favorite move against such a position on the validity of knowledge claims by pointing out that we can never be sure whether our belief is true because there is always the possibility that some subsequent experience would undermine our present belief. Hence, according to the skeptic, to accept such an uncontradicted experience as valid is to reflect dogmatism.

Such a move on the part of the skeptic, however, would not bother the Advaitins. According to them, empirical knowledge has a conditional status; it is invariably sublated when the knowledge of Brahman dawns. In this respect empirical knowledge and false cognition are essentially similar. In both cases, the contents of cognitions are modifications of nescience (avidyā) and have relative existence: they are neither real (sat) like Brahman, nor unreal (asat) like a square circle. The only difference between the two types of cognitions is
that one of them leads to successful activities, whereas the other does not. But both types stand in sharp contrast to Brahman-knowledge.

Hence, when the Advaitins claimed that empirical knowledge is self-validating until contradicted, they did not thereby imply that such a claim of validity was an admission of the real status of the objects of such cognitions. The knowledge which is never contradicted is the knowledge of Brahman which is the only reality. All other cognitions are sublated, at some time or other. The contents of these cognitions are indescribable (anirvacaniya). Even an erroneous cognition has such a content, but nonetheless it is erroneous because it fails to lead to a successful action, and hence is sublated by another experience. So, validity of an empirical cognition is not understood in the Advaita philosophy in terms of some correspondence between the experience and a real object; rather, a cognition is said to be valid so long as it is not negated.

The notion of validity of a cognition thus understood should show that the skeptic's objection, mentioned earlier, cannot be raised against the Advaita position. The skeptic can, at most, take issue with the Advaitins over the notion of such validity. But in that case the issue between the skeptic and the Advaitins is not that of dogmatism and skepticism, but of a more fundamental type: the Advaitic position is such that it does not allow the skeptic to make his move. Obviously the Advaitins are under no bind to change their philosophical assumptions to make themselves vulnerable to the skeptic's attack. And regarding Brahman-knowledge, the Advaitins claim that it is ineffable and can be had only through some mystic insight: hence it is not subject to challenge or doubt.

THE NYĀYA

It should be particularly interesting to see how a nonmystic, realistic school like the Nyāya would respond to a skeptic. The cornerstone of the Nyāya realism is the belief that a veridical experience has a corresponding objective reality. If I have an experience which is verbalized in the form, 'I see a chair in front of me', then, if there is in reality a chair in front of me, my statement is true. The Nyāya held that perceptual knowledge arises when there is, among other things, a direct contact of the senses with the objects one claims to know (indriyārthasannikarṣa), and not with their images or "ideas."

The Nyāya view of perception thus stood in direct contrast to the Stoic theory, which held that in our perception we are aware of the impressions of an object but not the object itself. Consequently, it avoided some of the difficulties associated with the Stoic position which prompted the rise of Pyrrhonic skepticism. From the Nyāya point of view, the content of a perceptual cognition is the objective reality as known: there is no image standing between the senses and the object.

It is to be noted that the Nyāya admitted of a distinction between determinate (savikalpaka) and indeterminate (nirvikalpaka) perceptions, but it was
strictly for logical necessity rather than due to some mystical bias. The entities perceived in indeterminate perception are not any more real than they are in determinate perception; in both cases we apprehend the real nature of the objects. But in the former instance, we are said to perceive the object and its appropriate property (jāti) by themselves without putting them together in the form, say, 'This is a chair'. In savikalpaka perception we have knowledge in this judgmental form, at least implicitly.

Nirvikalpaka perception was postulated in order to make sense of the idea of savikalpaka perception; as it is, the existence of the former is not directly knowable. It was held that to have a determinate cognition of the form, for example, 'This is a chair', we must have the prior knowledge of the character of chairhood and of the object separately; otherwise, it was argued, it would lead to anavasthā (ad infinitum).

Unlike the mystics, the Naiyāyikas believed that cognition of the real is not vitiated by its association with language. An erroneous perception is the apprehension of an object as something other than what it is (anyathā), and this is due to some defect in the perceiver or in the particular situation of perception. But this “relativity of perception” did not lead the Nyāya, as it did the Pyrrhonic skeptics, to believe in the existence of impressions, which were thought to have veiled the actual object. The Nyāya held that even in cases of erroneous perception there is sense-object contact. For example, in the illusory perception of a white shell as a silvery object on the beach in bright sunlight, the silvery color is a real color, simply misplaced, but nonetheless brought into our perceptual range and perceived directly through some form of extraordinary perception.

The Naiyāyikas proposed pragmatic tests to decide between veridical and nonveridical perceptions. This procedure was meant as a criterion of truth, from the subject's point of view, to bring conviction that what he perceives is true. It was not viewed as a condition of truth, which, according to the Nyāya, consists of strict correspondence between the cognition and the objective reality. So, the Nyāya held that a perceptual belief is known to be true if one acts upon it and succeeds in the effort. The type and extent of verification vary depending on the prevailing situation.

The skeptic should now be ready for his move. He would point out that the pragmatic criterion proposed by the Nyāya to decide whether a belief is true is never conclusive. That is, even though one could be justified in holding a belief as true, it could, in fact, be false. This was the point of Carneades, who held that there is no logical connection between the criteria and the conditions of truth; one cannot guarantee the other. Whatever may be the strength of an evidence, or a set of evidences, it is logically compatible with the hypothesis that the belief is not in strict correspondence with the objective reality.

The “common-sense” philosophy of the Nyāya would find it absurd to formulate a demand for certainty or conclusiveness in terms of logical possi-
bility, when it comes to deciding whether an object really exists. The Nyāya would certainly agree with Austin, who strongly took issue with such a demand for certainty, and showed, from the ordinary language point of view, that it is "grossly artificial" and "perfectly absurd" to claim that we cannot conclusively establish the existence of objects corresponding to our beliefs. In Austin's words:

There are vast numbers of things which I take it for granted that a telephone won't do, and doubtless an infinite number of things which it never enters my head to consider the possibility that it might do; but surely it would be perfectly absurd to say that 'This is a telephone' entails the whole galaxy of statements to the effect that it doesn't and won't do these things, and to conclude that I haven't really established that anything is a telephone until, per impossible, I have confirmed the whole infinite class of these supposed entailments.

The Nyāya would hold that, being the fallible creatures we are, we often make errors; but that should not be used as a general excuse to suspend our judgment about knowledge, or to deny its possibility. In trying to find out things about nature, we should aim for reasonable certainty; the quest for empirical knowledge does not require as its goal total absence of theoretical doubt. The Naiyāyikas would not undermine the role of doubt in our search for truth: in fact, Gautama, the author of the Nyāyasūtra, believed that doubt is the chief incentive to speculation. But the Nyāya would have agreed with Quine when he said:

Cartesian doubt is not the way to begin. Retaining our present beliefs about nature, we can still ask how we can have arrived at them. Also:

Doubt prompts the theory of knowledge, yes; but knowledge, also, was what prompted the doubt. Scepticism is an offshoot of science. . . . Rudimentary physical science, that is, common sense about bodies, is thus needed as a springboard for scepticism. . . . I am . . . making the point that sceptical doubts are scientific doubts.

The Nyāya and the skeptic thus would have two different points of view on the possibility of knowledge and on their philosophical methodology. The Nyāya procedure is critical and cautious, but to the skeptic, it is still dogmatic. On the other hand, the Nyāya would not think that radical skepticism could pose a genuine threat or even a sensible challenge to its philosophy.

The mystic schools of India, on the other hand, would point out to the skeptic that if relativity of perception leads to the "problem of perception," then the way out of this problem is to have a nonrelative, "pure" perception. That is, these schools would not hold that the skeptic's problem necessarily points to a suspension of judgment regarding the possibility of knowledge; they would point out another direction which the skeptic would not venture into. The skeptic in the Western tradition would find it hard to conceive of perception
in a nonrelative way: for him, perception is, by nature, relative—if not in terms of the extraneous factors relative to each perceiver, then at least in terms of the point of view of the perceiver. Perception, for him, is by necessity relative to a point of view. But this is the exact point on which the mystic would disagree. According to him, a nonrelative, mystical vision is not limited to any particular point of view, and because of this, it is ineffable.

The mystic would further point out that the problem raised by Carneades also affirms the mystic’s position. Our perceptual evidence can never guarantee the truth of our beliefs because perception can never fully comprehend the nature of reality. Mystical insights are beyond the limitations of perception and conceptualization; hence they can apprehend the truth. This truth, the mystic would hasten to remind us, is not a property of our beliefs, but is the reality as it is.

NOTES

4. I confine my account of Academic skepticism to that of Carneades, and unless otherwise indicated, it is based on Charlotte Stough, Greek Skepticism (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), chap. 3. My description of Pyrrhonism finds its source in Naess, Scepticism, chap. 1.
5. Stough, Greek Skepticism, p. 39.
6. Stough, Greek Skepticism, p. 53.
7. The Pyrrhonist’s method of inducing doubt by “putting things in opposition” is not limited to just perceptual claims but is extended to all subjects of inquiry, even to logic and mathematics. See Naess, Scepticism, p. 34. Descartes’ “evil genius” hypothesis is a good example of such pervasive doubt.
8. See Naess, Scepticism, p. 34.
9. See Stough, Greek Skepticism, p. 117.
10. For an account of the influence of Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus on the early modern philosophy of Europe, see Richard H. Popkin, The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum Ltd., 1960).
12. The Jains also held that a liberated being can attain a state of omniscience.
13. See Stough, Greek Skepticism, pp. 31–34.
15. In fact, the Cārvākas were vehemently against such a prospect.
16. Unless otherwise indicated, from now on for the rest of the article the term ‘skeptic’ will stand for a Pyrrhonic skeptic.
2. My observations on the Yogācāra Buddhism and the Śāmkhya-Yoga are based on Karl H. Potter's unpublished "Linguaphobic Epistemology in India: An Appraisal," with the author's permission. This paper was read at a conference on language and Indian philosophy, held in Toronto, September 2–4, 1974.

19. An extraordinary person, such as a yogin, can presumably "know" through such direct awareness and can comprehend the object as it is, but for an ordinary person these nirvikalpaka perceptions convey nothing intelligible.

22. And I might add the Śāmkhya too.
24. Such consciousness is said to be attainable in a state of deep absorption, known in the system as "asamprajñāta Samādhi," where the object-less pure consciousness shines forth.

30. We also perceive the relation of inherence (samavāya) which was thought to hold between an object and its property. The objective status given to jāti and samavāya betrays the native of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika realism.
31. It is exemplified by the fact that the presence or absence of some factor in the subject or the situation makes the object "appear" differently.
32. Silvery color as a quality or silverness as a jāti were viewed as objective entities by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika.
33. J. L. Austin, Sense and Sensibilia (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 122. It should be kept in mind that the citation of this or other authors to substantiate the Nyāya way of thinking should not be taken to mean any general agreement between the Nyāya and these authors about their objectives and methods of inquiry.
34. Austin, Sense and Sensibilia, pp. 122–123.