

# Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonian Approaches to the Skeptical Way of Life

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**ABSTRACT** | This essay develops an intercultural approach to the skeptical way of life through an interpretation of two classical traditions: the Pyrrhonian tradition of ancient Greece and the Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition of classical India. The skeptical way of life is characterized by several important features, including a goal of tranquility or of freedom from disturbance and suffering, a philosophical strategy of dialectical argument that terminates in the suspension of judgment or the abandonment of views, a purgative philosophic therapy, and life without belief. A constellation of practical questions that emerge from the skeptical way of life are also considered, including the skeptic's character, conformity, and care. One of the principal aims of the essay will be to develop this intercultural account of the skeptical way of life and to show by way of this illustrative example how our understanding of skepticism and ancient philosophy is enhanced through an intercultural approach.

**KEYWORDS** | Madhyamaka; Pyrrhonism; Skepticism; Philosophy as a Way of Life; Intercultural Philosophy

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## 1 Introduction

Considerable scholarly engagement has been devoted to the juxtaposition of the philosophic approaches of the Mādhyamika Buddhists of classical India and the Pyrrhonian skeptics of ancient Greece.<sup>1</sup> Comparisons are pursued to demonstrate both congruities among the arguments deployed by these philosophical traditions and the coherence of each approach as a philosophical system.<sup>2</sup> Scholarship comparing these traditions is further supported by the intriguing report found in the doxography of Diogenes Laërtius. In this report, Pyrrho of Elis (365–275 B.C.E.), the early Greek skeptic and namesake of one of two ancient Greek skeptical philosophies, is said to have associated with Indian philosophers while journeying in the entourage of Alexander the Great (Diog. Laert. 9.61–62; LS 1A; IG III-22).<sup>3</sup> Even more intriguing is a many-layered doxographical report that Pyrrho's style of argumentation included a tetralemma argument similar to the *catuṣkoṭi* of Nāgārjuna (second or third century C.E.), who wrote the foundational texts of Madhyamaka Buddhism (Aristocles in Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 14.18.758c–d; LS 1F; IG III-24).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, some scholars have endeavored to suggest an historical encounter and mutual influence among these two philosophical traditions.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the two approaches share certain philosophic features, including for example, under at least one interpretation, a dialectical form of argumentation and a skeptical way of life without beliefs. Hence, a skeptical interpretation of Madhyamaka is strengthened by a comparison with Pyrrhonism as a way of seeing Madhyamaka skepticism as a coherent philosophic approach. Such comparative strategies are compelling but reflect a certain prejudice that takes the Hellenic tradition as paradigmatic. These strategies are at least partly a result of the efforts of scholars to show repeatedly the philosophical interest of Indian traditions to a profession largely attentive solely to the ancient Greeks and their modern European philosophical descendants. Thanks to the success of this work developing this comparison, this essay is afforded a running start in its efforts to establish a dynamic, intercultural approach to the skeptical way of life.

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1 This essay adopts the following modern naming conventions: Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonism are philosophies or schools of thought; adherents of these respective schools, Mādhyamikas and Pyrrhonists, respectively.

2 See the comparative work of Matilal (1986), Garfield ([1990], 2002), Burton (2017), Dreyfus (2011), Dreyfus and Garfield (2011, 2022), Mills (2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2020), and Brons (2018).

3 Diog. Laert. = Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. LS = Long and Sedley (1987). IG = Inwood and Gerson (1997).

4 Euseb. *Praep. evang.* = Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel (Praeparatio evangelica)*.

5 For accounts of a common philosophic heritage among Indian and Greek skeptics, see Flinchoff (1980), McEvilley (1982, 2002), Kuzminski (2007, 2008, 2021), Halkias (2014), and Beckwith (2015). I am sympathetic to these arguments, but I suspend judgment if there is yet sufficient evidence to establish a persuasive account of an historical encounter or shared Indo-Hellenic skeptical lineage. However, I am persuaded that we enhance our understanding when we read these two traditions together. On Pyrrho's use of the tetralemma see especially Bett (2000, 123–140) and Beckwith (2015, 40, 202–203).

The philosophical interest animating this essay is a constellation of questions raised by the skeptical way of life. These questions are connected to the practical aspects of the skeptic's way: they include how skeptics, like the Mādhyamikas and Pyrrhonists, can recommend their way of life as one worth going in for, that is, how can anyone see their radical style of skepticism as a desirable way to live, as well as certain ethical questions concerning the skeptic's moral character and whether skeptics merely complacently conform to the moral conventions of their societies. Contrary to some common comparative directions in professional philosophy, the resources to address these questions, this essay will suggest, travel not solely from Greece to India but from India to Greece as well.<sup>6</sup> While Pyrrhonism was reaching its final developments in the writings of Sextus Empiricus around the second or third century C.E., at that same time Madhyamaka's seminal philosophy was first articulated in the writings of Nāgārjuna. But whereas Pyrrhonism after Sextus lay dormant until its rediscovery in early modern Europe, Madhyamaka continued its development as Buddhism migrated from India to Central and East Asia, where it especially flourished as the principal philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism. Consequently, understanding Madhyamaka as a philosophical way of life puts one in a better position to understand how Pyrrhonists, and philosophic skeptics more generally, may have addressed this constellation of practical questions concerning their skeptical way of life.

In the following sections, I first distinguish between two kinds of skepticism: epistemological skepticism, a theoretical and narrow view typically developed as an objection to be rejected rather than accepted and endorsed, and way-of-life skepticism, a practical and global approach to living a philosophic life without beliefs (section 2). Then, this approach to skepticism as the skeptical way of life is characterized within the two traditions of interest for this essay, the Pyrrhonian tradition of ancient Greece and the Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition of classical India (section 3). Finally, the constellation of practical questions that emerge from the skeptical way of life, including the skeptic's character, conformity, and care are developed and addressed, primarily by discovering philosophical resources within Madhyamaka to support Pyrrhonism (section 4). One of the principal aims of the essay will be to develop this intercultural account of the skeptical way of life and to show by way of this illustrative example how our understanding of skepticism and ancient philosophy is enhanced through an intercultural approach.

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6 The works of Garfield ([1990] 2002) and of Brons (2018) are two examples of the kind of intercultural analyses I am undertaking here.

## 2 Whetting Stone or Way of Life

Skepticism, as a philosophical view, is rather narrowly conceived. Contemporary professional philosophers have tended to understand skepticism as an epistemological view about the possibility or impossibility of the knowledge of objects in certain domains, such as knowledge of the external world. Likewise, students of philosophy, especially at universities in the United States, are often first introduced to philosophical skepticism through reading Descartes' *Meditations*. Consequently, skepticism is understood not as a serious competitor in philosophical debates but rather a challenge to be overcome, principally as a way of testing the philosophic mettle of an apparently more serious epistemological theory under consideration. After all, don't we all perfectly well *know* that God is not an evil manipulator and that we are neither brains in vats nor consciousnesses trapped in a computer simulation? The point is to rule out these hypotheses as objections while our everyday knowledge of the ordinary world remains insulated from any challenges from theoretical exercises in epistemology (Burnyeat [1984] 1997; Bett 1993; Bett 2010). Hence, such skeptical hypotheses are, as it were, intellectual whetting stones: they are developed to sharpen the arguments that philosophers really intend to endorse.

This modern, whetting-stone conception of skepticism is the more recent understanding. In contrast, ancient philosophers, not only in ancient Greece and Rome but also in classical India and ancient China, conceived of skepticism as a way of life (Kjellberg 1994; Hadot 1995, 2002, 2011; Cooper 2012; Ganeri 2013; Mills 2018b; Moore 2020). According to Pierre Hadot (2002, 55; 2011, 87–88), whose scholarship on ancient Greek and Roman philosophy has recently reinvigorated the way-of-life approach, each ancient philosophical school selected an ideal of wisdom and prescribed a regimen of spiritual exercises—"spiritual" because such exercises are concerned with the transformation of the whole self, not only the reason, intellect, or soul. These exercises are analogous to the athlete's training or the physician's cure: they serve as a therapeutic discourse, the aim of which is "to form more than inform" (Hadot 2011, 88). On this reading, philosophy itself, then, is principally a *practical* choice of a way of life and a regimen of exercises in service of the student's progress toward the ideal of wisdom articulated by the school. Philosophy is not merely about transforming how one thinks but transforming how one lives. The ideal of wisdom of the skeptical way of life is peace, tranquility, or freedom from disturbance or suffering, and its regimen of exercises include a dialectical form of argumentation and a life without belief, as we shall consider further below. This ideal is exemplified by the philosophical

models of Pyrrho and the Buddha, both of whom wrote nothing.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it was how they lived their lives that served as philosophical inspirations.

### **3 Two Skeptical Ways**

The skeptical ways of life of interest for this essay are the Pyrrhonian tradition of ancient Greece and the Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition of classical India (sections 3.1 and 3.2, respectively). Both traditions share several philosophic features. On whether such features suggest a common philosophic heritage I will suspend judgment, but others have endeavored to suggest such an account (Flinthoff 1980; McEvilley 1982, 2002; Kuzminski 2007, 2008, 2021; Halkias 2014; Beckwith 2015). For this essay's purposes, once again, I wish to show how reading these two traditions together help not only to aid in addressing a certain constellation of practical questions raised by their approach but also further develop an intercultural understanding of skepticism as a way of life. This development, I believe, strengthens the case for an intercultural approach to both skepticism and ancient philosophy. The common philosophic features, which I shall emphasize below, are as follows:

1. a goal of tranquility or of freedom from disturbance and suffering
2. a philosophical strategy of dialectical argument that terminates in the suspension of judgment or the abandonment of views,
3. a purgative philosophic therapy, and
4. an activity guided by how things appear without asserting how things are really or ultimately, that is, living without beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

In the following two sections, I develop an interpretation of the skeptical way of life in Pyrrhonism and Madhyamaka independently. I do so intentionally to avoid scaffolding one interpretation to the other. Each way of life is a skeptical approach in its own right. Once this matter is clearly revealed, the two are joined in an intercultural analysis of the practical questions raised by the skeptical way of life.

#### **3.1 A Pyrrhonian Approach to the Skeptical Way of Life**

Sextus Empiricus offers our fullest, extant description of the Pyrrhonian approach to the skeptical way of life in the first book of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*Pyrrhōneiai Hypotyposesis* = *PH*). Unfortunately, a probably more detailed parallel description in his *Skeptical Treatises* (*Skeptika Hypomnēmata* = *M* 7–11), which

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7 To describe the Buddha as a sort of skeptical sage is perhaps controversial, but such an understanding is not without support in the early Buddhist tradition. For example, in response to certain speculative metaphysical questions, the Buddha says he holds no views (*Majjhima Nikāya* 1.426–432, 483–489, trans. Holder 2006, 95–100, 117–122). Mills (2018a, 98–99; 2018b, 13–19; 2020, 70–72) describes this understanding as the “quietist strand” in Buddhism.

8 For a different organization of parallels see McEvilley (2002) and Brons (2018).

are collected under the names *Against the Logicians* (M 7–8), *Against the Physicists* (M 9–10), and *Against the Ethicists* (M 11), is now lost.<sup>9</sup> In the *Outlines*, Sextus describes skepticism as an ability, not a doctrine or theory. He describes the ability in relation to three other important skeptical terms—equality of strength, suspension of judgment, and tranquility:

The skeptical ability (*skeptikē dunamis*) is one that produces oppositions among things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatsoever, from which, because of the equal strength (*isostheneia*) in the opposing objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment (*epochē*) and after that to tranquility (*ataraxia*). (PH 1.8, trans. Bett 2021)

What skeptics are able to do, according to Sextus, is to place appearances and thoughts of any kind against one another so that each is equally opposed to the other. Sextus clarifies that when skeptics create such oppositions, they merely place them against each other; they neither assert nor deny anything (PH 1.9). The result of the opposition is that neither side is any more convincing or unconvincing than the other (PH 1.10). Hence, skeptics suspend judgment and their “thought comes to a stop” (PH 1.10, trans. Bett 2021). With suspension of judgment skeptics discover tranquility, which Sextus describes as freedom from disturbance and calmness of the soul (*psuchēs aochlēsia kai galēnotēs*).

To be free from trouble is the goal of the skeptical way of life, a goal shared with the atomist traditions of Democritus and the Epicureans (PH 1.25; Warren 2002). Finding themselves trouble-free comes unexpectedly (*tuchikōs*) to the skeptics, although, Sextus tells us, tranquility was their original motivation to begin their investigations—indeed, investigating (*skeptesthai*) is from where they draw their name (PH 1.25–6, 1.7). For they had hoped that by investigating they would resolve the inconsistency in things and would learn which arguments were sound and to which they should give their assent and, accordingly, find peace (PH 1.12; M 1.6). However, every argument, as it turns out, has at least one other of equal strength opposing it, and the skeptics, instead, suspend judgment on everything and, consequently, have no beliefs of their own (PH 1.12).<sup>10</sup> According to Sextus, it is this suspension of judgment and lack of beliefs that tranquility follows, as a shadow follows a body (PH 1.29). So, although the skeptics’ original motivations of resolving inconsistency and discovering true accounts are left unresolved and undiscovered, the skeptics nevertheless find the tranquility, for which they were searching, because of their suspension of judgment

9 The conventional abbreviation *M* derives from the title of a separate work *Against Those in the Disciplines* (*Pros Mathēmatikous* = M 1–6), to which the incomplete *Skeptical Treatises* were attached and transmitted as its final five books.

10 Skeptics suspend judgment as a result of the appearance of equal strength of convincingness, or lack thereof, of the opposing arguments; they do not assert that the arguments really are equal (PH 1.196). On the skeptics lack of belief, see the papers collected in Burnyeat and Frede (1997), as well as Fine (1996) and Thorsrud (2009, 173–182).

on matters of belief (*PH* 1.25–6). When it comes to those feelings that are forced upon skeptics, such as being cold or thirsty, they will have moderate reactions (*metriopatheia*) (*PH* 1.25, 29–30).

Sextus vividly illustrates the skeptic's unexpected arrival at tranquility through the story of Apelles the painter (*PH* 1.28–29). Apelles was trying to paint a horse, but he was struggling to capture the likeness of froth on the horse's mouth. Finally, when Apelles gives up and throws his cleaning sponge at the painting, he fortuitously creates the image of the froth and so produces unintentionally by another means the very effect he was intentionally hoping to create. Sextus tells us skeptics arrive at tranquility in the same way. Unable to resolve the inconsistency among competing appearances and arguments, they suspend judgment, and by suspending judgment find themselves at peace, that is, producing unintentionally by another means the very effect they were intentionally hoping to create.

The skeptic's tranquility follows suspension of judgment (*epochē*), but this suspension is regarding any appearances or arguments, that is, it is a global suspension of judgment. Skeptics, then, must be equipped with effective techniques for producing the oppositions that lead to suspension of judgment. According to Sextus, the Pyrrhonian approach has developed several modes (*tropoi*), the most important of which are the Five Modes of Agrippa (*PH* 1.164–77, 2.19–20; Diog. Laert. 9.88–90; IG III-22; Barnes 1990; Thorsrud 2009, 147–160; Woodruff 2010). These modes are general and, hence, may be deployed dialectically against any number of arguments that seek to rationally justify the truth of a belief. Skeptics regard the modes merely as tools in the skeptical toolbox; they do not assert or deny anything in deploying them but only use their interlocutors' own standards of rational argumentation to undermine their beliefs, reveal their rashness, and because those beliefs in question cannot be decided due to the equal strength of opposing arguments, bring about suspension of judgment (*PH* 1.14–5, 20).

Two of the Agrippan Modes, Dispute and Relativity, allow skeptics to maneuver their dogmatic opponents—dogmatists, such as the Stoics or Epicureans, who believe things really are a certain way—into a position where they must offer reasons in favor of supporting their beliefs. The point of these modes is to show that there are unresolved disagreements about the beliefs in question such that they stand in need of considerations in their favor. Some, for example, may disagree with the dogmatists and hold a contrary opinion (Dispute) (*PH* 1.165). Others may be differently situated such that things appear differently from their perspectives (Relativity) (*PH* 1.167). Once the dogmatists attempt to justify their beliefs by offering reasons, skeptics can deploy the three other Agrippan Modes, sometimes described as Agrippa's Trilemma—Infinite Regress, Hypothesis, and Reciprocity—to bring opposing arguments of equal strength against them.

Skeptics deploy the Mode of Infinite Regress when dogmatists offer a consideration in favor of their belief (*PH* 1.166). The skeptics will respond that this consideration too is under dispute and, hence, demand another in favor of accepting it, and so on infinitely because every consideration in favor will need its own established consideration. The skeptics, however, say that it is impossible to judge infinitely many considerations, and so the dogmatists' beliefs will be left unjustified (*PH* 2.78). Skeptics use the Mode of Hypothesis when the dogmatists attempt to terminate the regress in a self-evident consideration (*PH* 1.168). Skeptics will in turn respond that this attempt is mere assertion: if this were acceptable, it would allow anyone, even those who hold beliefs contrary to the dogmatists, to justify their own beliefs on the basis of their feelings of apparent self-evidence (*M* 8.436; Thorsrud 2009, 153–156; Woodruff 2010, 225). Finally, skeptics apply the Mode of Reciprocity when the dogmatists claim that the consideration in favor of their belief and the belief itself mutually establish one another. The skeptics will reply that the belief is what is precisely in question, and it cannot itself serve as a justification for the consideration intended to establish it (*PH* 1.169). Through use of the modes, skeptical practice brings one into a state in which a belief in question is not able to be decided and suspension of judgment occurs. The skeptics themselves, of course, do not say one should suspend judgment but that this is what happens when skeptical practice brings them to this state. Indeed, it is rather the dogmatists' own standards of rationality that requires suspension of judgment.

The skeptics' dialectical arguments, such as Agrippa's Five Modes among others, are a powerful antidote against dogmatic reasoning. Indeed, Sextus compares skeptical argument to a sort of medicine, a purgative drug, which in curing the body by evacuating certain harmful substances also evacuates itself (*PH* 1.206, 2.188; *M* 8.480–281; Nussbaum [1994] 2009, 309–311; Thorsrud 2009, 136–141). This seemingly unusual metaphor responds to the dogmatists' charge of inconsistency. If dogmatists object that skeptics are inconsistent because in offering such arguments the skeptics surely must believe their own arguments really are rationally persuasive, the skeptics will reply once again that they neither assert nor deny anything; their arguments are part of practice which has a certain effect, namely, the purging of dogmatic beliefs and arguments intended to establish them. In turn, the skeptical arguments themselves are also canceled and "thought comes to a stop" (*PH* 1.10, trans. Bett 2021). As Sextus puts it, skeptical arguments are like many things that put themselves in the same condition as what they put other things: besides the metaphor of the purgative drug, he also describes them as a fire which burns wood and then burns itself out or a ladder that once climbed is kicked away (*M* 8.480–481). "At the end of the Skeptical process," according to Nussbaum, "Skepticism itself has vanished" (Nussbaum [1994] 2009, 311). What remains are the habits that skeptical practice institutes



and the way of life without belief, which they support (Nussbaum [1994] 2009, 312).

Skeptical practice will eventually bring about the complete dissolution of the mature skeptic's beliefs, but such a way of life may seem implausible. The skeptics' dogmatic opponents certainly thought so. Indeed, the skeptics were repeatedly charged with inaction (*apraxia*), that is, that skeptics cannot even get started taking some actions but not others if they have no beliefs (Vogt 2010). According to Sextus, however, skeptics are not at all inactive but rather are guided by how things appear (*PH* 1.21). After all, skeptics do not deny that things appear to them the way they appear (*PH* 1.13). Rather, they suspend judgment on whether how things *appear* is how they really *are*—the latter is what skeptical investigation is for (*PH* 1.22). Indeed, Sextus describes four sorts of guiding appearances: everyday appearances from one's nature, from one's involuntary feelings, from laws and customs, and from technical expertise (*PH* 1.23–24). These fourfold observances seem best understood as related to the skeptic's dispositions (Thorsrud 2009, 183–196). In other words, skeptics respond to certain appearances and are guided by them because they are acting in accordance with the dispositions they have developed. Hence, they act according to the guidance of nature when they perceive and think, they act according to necessary feelings when they eat and drink after feeling hungry or thirsty, they act according to law and custom when they conform to certain societal practices, and they act according to technical expertise when they engage in certain trades they have learned (*PH* 1.23–24). Sextus says that skeptics live this way without having any beliefs: their activity is just the response of their dispositions to certain appearances happening to them. That is why Sextus describes these observances in particular: they emerge from a skeptic's individual nature or from the received habits and practices from their upbringing. The skeptical way of life, hence, proceeds not from beliefs and reasoning but from the mature skeptic's dispositions in response to certain appearances, and it is this way of life that is trouble-free. Indeed, it is fitting that Sextus was a physician: by applying the skeptical therapy he cures us of our dogmatic rashness and frees us from the anxieties caused by the conceit of reason.

### **3.2 A Madhyamaka Approach to the Skeptical Way of Life**

The principal goal of Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy is the realization that all things are empty (*śūnya*) because they lack an intrinsic nature, or essence (*svabhāva*). Nāgārjuna's philosophy arrives at this universal emptiness in what is regarded as the root text of Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy, his *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* = *MMK*). Each of the twenty-seven verse chapters of *MMK* analyze certain conceptions, most of which belong to the Abhidharma schools of Buddhist philosophy. Through these analyses Nāgārjuna dissolves the very concepts in question, leaving his readers and op-

ponents empty-handed, as it were. The concepts, which his Ābhidharmika opponents intend to use to establish certain metaphysical theories underlying the Buddha's teachings, are shown not to be false or nothing, but rather the very activity of conceptual creation and designation, even philosophizing itself, is overcome. Put another way, Mādhyamikas neither assert nor deny anything is really or ultimately real. When we analyze any phenomena whatsoever to discover what they really are, "we find nothing; we come up empty" (Dreyfus and Garfield 2022, 5). Another way of understanding this realization of emptiness is the Madhyamaka approach to the Buddhist teaching of two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth (MMK 24.8).<sup>11</sup> Conventional truth, on the one hand, means the commonsense beliefs useful for living in the world as it is ordinarily conceived of and talked about in everyday life. Ultimate truth, on the other hand, means "what is left standing (if anything) after conventional truth is subjected to rigorous philosophic analysis," but according to the Mādhyamikas, nothing stands up to this analysis (Cowherds 2016a, 618): when we look for what is ultimately real, we come up empty. For mature Mādhyamikas all conceptualizing thus stands still. This end to "conceptual proliferation" or "hypostatization" (*prapañca*) lies at the heart of Nāgārjuna's approach: this activity, because it takes certain things to be really real, and thus attaches significance to them, stands in the way of the Buddhist goal of liberation and freedom from suffering (*nirvāṇa*) (MMK "Dedictory Verses," 18.6–7, 25.24).<sup>12</sup> This is why Madhyamaka can be interpreted as a skeptical way of life: it analyzes certain accounts of reality, dissolves their conceit, and clears the way to a trouble-free life.

The philosophical strategy of conceptual analysis and dissolution is not unusual within Buddhist philosophy: all Buddhist traditions regard the person as merely conventional, an aggregate of psychophysical constituents (*skandhas*) without an underlying independently existing self (Williams [1989] 2009, 16). Indeed, Buddhist devotional practice is intended to loosen the attachments to the "I" as the crucial step on the path to liberation from suffering and from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Siderits 2021, 35–36, 43–88). The Madhyamaka development is to turn this strategy not only to the dissolution of the conception of the self, among other complex entities like chariots for example, but to everything, even the concepts of the Buddhist's philosophical toolkit. The strategy aims to bring all grasping and attachment to an end. These new targets of Madhyamaka philosophical investigation and conceptual analysis are, however, not out of sync with early Buddhist teaching: the parables of the water snake and raft show the dangers, and subsequent suffering, of attachment to Buddhist

<sup>11</sup> On the two truths, see Jayatilleke (1963, 363–364), Huntington (2007, 111–116), and the Cowherds (2011, 2016a, 2016b).

<sup>12</sup> Mills (2018b, 36–39) translates *prapañca* as "conceptual proliferation," Siderits and Katsura (2013) as "hypostatization." Other translations include "metaphysical fabrication" and "conceptual construction" (Berger 2010, 40 and Garfield 1995 by way of the Tibetan translation, respectively). According to Siderits and Katsura (2013, 15), hypostatization in the context of MMK is "the process of reification or 'thing-ifying': taking what is actually just a useful form of speech to refer to some real entity."

teaching itself (*Majjhima Nikāya* 1.130–142, trans. Holder 2006, 101–116; Mills 2020, 71–72). In these famous parables, the Buddha tells his students that if his teachings are mistakenly understood, they are like taking hold of a snake by its tail, for it will turn back and bite, or like one who uses a raft to make a dangerous crossing and then picks up the raft and carries it around on one's back. Indeed, Nāgārjuna explicitly connects emptiness to the parable of the water snake: "Emptiness misunderstood destroys the slow-witted, / like a serpent wrongly held" (*MMK* 24.11). To misuse and become attached to the teachings causes the very suffering from which the teachings are intended to free us. This is why the concluding verses of *MMK* describe the Buddha's true teaching as "the abandonment of all views" (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya*) (*MMK* 27.30, trans. Siderits and Katsura 2013).

To arrive at the realization that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature Nāgārjuna deploys dialectical arguments. In *MMK* these arguments analyze the concepts of his fellow Buddhists, the Ābhidharmikas, and in the *Dispeller of Disputes* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī* = *VV*), he employs dialectical arguments in response to the objections and views of the Brāhmiṇical philosophers of the Nyāya school, the Naiyāyikas. These dialectical arguments begin with the claims and concepts of his opponents, explicate each of their logical possibilities, and show that each possibility is absurd: when we look for what is ultimately real, we come up empty. The realization of emptiness, however, is not an assertion or denial. Emptiness is the skeptical overcoming of our "instinctive commitment to the idea that there must be a way that things really are" (Dreyfus and Garfield 2022, 6). Nāgārjuna's opponents' views lead to absurd results not because they are false but because they make a fundamental cognitive mistake in their approach to phenomena. Hence, without Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka medicine, we will persist in the misleading philosophic project of arguing some view is true and others false. Indeed, even emptiness itself, as we shall see, is to be relinquished. This is why Nāgārjuna tells us: "Emptiness is taught by the conquerors as the expedient to get rid of all views. / But those for whom emptiness is a view have been called incurable" (*MMK* 13.8, trans. Siderits and Katsura 2013).<sup>13</sup> Why incurable? Because they persist in the project from which the Madhyamaka skeptical practice is intended to free them. The important Prāsaṅgika commentator Candrakīrti (ca. seventh century C.E.) describes this incurable person who asserts that emptiness ultimately underlies all things as "someone who when told that the shopkeeper has nothing to sell, asks to buy some of that nothing" (Dreyfus and Garfield 2022, 7).

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13 Siderits and Katsura (2013, 145) insert "metaphysical" in brackets before both instances of "view" (*dṛṣṭi*), which is not present in the Sanskrit. Garfield (1995, 212) does not include it in the translation from the Tibetan, but his commentary clarifies that "view in this sense is a view about what does or does not exist when existence is taken to mean inherent existence." In Buddhist thought, the holding of a view (*dṛṣṭi*) usually has the sense of holding a wrong view because holding any view is a mistake. See Gethin ([1997] 2004).

The general form of Nāgārjuna's dialectical arguments is the *prasaṅga*, or an argument to unwanted consequences. This style of argument, similar to a *reductio ad absurdum*, develops the possible consequences as a result of accepting an opponent's position. Each consequence is shown to be contradictory or inconsistent with other views the opponent also wishes to hold. The opponent, thus, in rejecting the unwanted consequences is forced to reject the position in question. Crucially, the argument is dialectical, Mādhyamikas move strictly from their opponents' own positions to the unwanted consequences and, ultimately, to their rejection without making any claims or commitments of their own or implying that a contradictory position is true (Williams [1989] 2009, 67; Mills 2018b, 52–53).

One example of Nāgārjuna's dialectical method is his analysis and critique of the epistemology of the Naiyāyikas (VV 30–51; Westerhoff 2010, 65–94; Mills 2016; 2018b, 54; Dreyfus and Garfield 2022, 10). They claimed that our knowledge of the world is established by certain *pramāṇas*, variously translated as “reliable cognitions,” “means of knowledge,” or “epistemic instruments.” According to the Naiyāyikas, *pramāṇas* are cognitive processes that consistently generate true beliefs. We are said to know some object, for example, a mug of coffee, because we perceive it and perception is one such reliable cognition. But Nāgārjuna asks what establishes the *pramāṇas*. They cannot be established by another *pramāṇa* because that *pramāṇa* must in turn be established and so on in an infinite regress (VV 31–32). They cannot be self-established because they would then be independent of the objects the knowledge of which they are intended to secure; we only know insofar as we know something, and there would not be a way to distinguish the success of a *pramāṇa* without reference to the object the knowledge of which it is supposed to secure (VV 40–41). The *pramāṇas* also cannot be established by their objects because if the objects were already established, there would be no need for *pramāṇas*, or if they are supposed to be mutually establishing, this is circular and, as a result, nothing is established (VV 44–46). Finally, *pramāṇas* cannot be established without any reason, for this just leaves unfinished the task of explaining how a secure means to knowledge is to be established (VV 51). Thus, Nāgārjuna maneuvers his opponents into failing to adhere to their own standards of rational justification: their position is left with the unwanted consequences of infinite regress, circularity, or arbitrary assertion. In rejecting these, they must also abandon the view in question.

Opponents of Mādhyamaka, of course, do not relinquish their views so readily. They charge the Mādhyamikas with inconsistency, a common objection to skepticism. This inconsistency objection can be formulated against both universal emptiness and the *prasaṅga* argument against *pramāṇas*: If emptiness characterizes everything, the argument establishing emptiness must be empty and, hence, is defective and can be ignored or, if it is not empty, it contradicts itself. Similarly, the argument against the establishment of reliable cognitions must ei-

ther have its own established reliable cognition to secure it, which is a contradiction, or if it has none, it is unwarranted and can be ignored. To this inconsistency objection, Nāgārjuna replies that he has no thesis: “If I had any thesis, that fault would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so there is indeed no fault for me” (VV 29, trans. Westerhoff 2010; Ruegg 2000, 115–133). Similarly, in *MMK*, Nāgārjuna tells us one does not assert or deny emptiness but that it “is said only for sake of instruction” (*MMK* 22.11, trans. Siderits and Katsura 2013). As Dreyfus and Garfield (2011, 116) put it, for Nāgārjuna philosophy is “in the business of providing therapy for those suffering from extreme views—views about the fundamental nature of reality.” Nāgārjuna’s approach, then, is best understood as a skeptical therapy that empties all views and, subsequently, empties itself along with them. Mills (2020, 35–39) describes this as a two-phase approach: In phase one, Nāgārjuna’s arguments seemingly establish the philosophical concepts necessary for the dismantling of the opponent’s views. In phase two, the Madhyamaka therapy is applied to itself, bringing an end to *prapañca*, that conceptual proliferation, which plagues us (Mills 2020, 58–63). Hence, Madhyamaka skeptical practice eventually cancels itself out, leaving behind in mature Mādhyamikas those habits that its skeptical practice cultivates and the resultant tranquility when all believing that things *really* are a certain way comes to a stop. In other words, the Madhyamaka approach brings about a peaceful life without beliefs.

#### **4 Why Live the Skeptical Way?**

This essay has emphasized several important features that characterize the skeptical way of life: tranquility, dialectical argumentation terminating in suspension of judgment or abandonment of views, purgative philosophic therapy, and life without belief. The goal of Madhyamaka skeptical practice is to free us from conceiving of phenomena as *really* existing a certain way (*prapañca*, “conceptual proliferation,” “hypostatization”). For the Mādhyamikas, this kind of conceptualizing tends towards grasping and attachment that stand in the way of liberation and freedom from suffering and from birth, death, and rebirth (*MMK* 18.5, 9). Similarly, for Pyrrhonists, skeptical practice leads to suspension of judgment and freedom from disturbance follows fortuitously. Believing that certain things in the world really are good or bad by nature puts us in a miserable state of fear and anxiety: if we have what we believe to be really good, we will be constantly worried about losing it; if we get what we believe to be really bad, we will be far more troubled by its presence (*PH* 1.29–30, 3.235–238; *M* 11.110–167). This is why for both Mādhyamikas and Pyrrhonists a life without belief is the medicine that cures this misery.

To arrive at this condition of freedom from suffering, both Mādhyamikas and Pyrrhonists employ dialectical argumentation that terminates in the skeptic

holding no beliefs or views. Here we can observe a difference in technique. Pyrrhonists, on the one hand, motivate suspension of judgment by bringing opposing appearances or arguments of equal strength (*isostheneia*), that is, they create oppositions in which neither side is any more convincing or unconvincing than the other (*PH* 1.10). The Mādhyamikas' analyses, on the other hand, do not create equal oppositions but rather reveal the contradictions, inconsistencies, and emptiness of all views (Brons 2018, 335–336; Dreyfus and Garfield 2022, 11–12).<sup>14</sup> Such argumentation, however, does not demonstrate a negative thesis: that the truth is that nothing is true or that the real nature of all things is that they lack a nature. In other words, neither Mādhyamikas nor Pyrrhonists are negative dogmatists. Indeed, their arguments are a kind of medicine, a purgative therapy, that expels not only dogmatic beliefs and views but the skeptical arguments as well (*PH* 1.206; *MMK* 13.8; Thorsrud 2009, 136–141; Mills 2020, 25–50). Accordingly, the skeptic's way of life is one without beliefs, guided by appearances and convention (*PH* 1.21–24; *MMK* 24; Thorsrud 2009, 183–196; Dreyfus and Garfield 2022, 12–16; Cowherds 2011).

Living the skeptical way of life raises several practical questions. These questions may be regarded as related to the ethical aspect of the skeptical way. The practical questions relate to the skeptic's character, conformity, and care. If skeptics live without beliefs and take appearance or convention as their guide, can they act ethically or possess virtuous characters? As Bett (2019, 158) puts it, “to what extent can the skeptic be an ethically engaged agent?” Moreover, if convention plays an important causal role in shaping the dispositions according to which skeptics live, do skeptics merely acquiesce and conform to prevailing moral conventions, even if seemingly morally repugnant? Finally, how should the skeptics other-regarding care be understood? These problems are raised especially for the Pyrrhonian skeptics because they explicitly offer as their special criteria of action the fourfold observances of nature, feelings, custom, and skill. Mādhyamikas, perhaps because of their longer-lived tradition and the broader soteriological interests of Buddhism, are less troubled.

Skeptics live without beliefs, including beliefs about what is really good and bad. Pyrrhonists, according to Sextus, follow appearances (*PH* 1.21–24). Bett (2019, 158–159) characterizes these reactions to appearances as natural and cultural. On the one hand, skeptics react passively from their individual natures and their involuntary feelings. On the other hand, they also react from culturally inculcated habits as well as technical training. Skeptics, however, neither assert nor deny anything about the moral quality of their reactions—indeed, they just happen. The activities of skeptics are the functions of dispositions shaped by their

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<sup>14</sup> This essay's approach to Nāgārjuna emphasizes his philosophical techniques as part of a skeptical way of life. This interpretation takes him seriously when he says he does not have any thesis (*VV* 29; *MMK* 13.8, 22.11). However, some have argued that Nāgārjuna engages in a kind of logical sleight of hand, that he indeed has a thesis. See, for example, Robinson (1972) and Hayes (1994). For a critique of these arguments, see Huntington (2007) along with Mills' (2020) skeptical interpretation and Nāgārjuna's two-phase approach discussed in section 3.2 above.

upbringing and practice. From the non-skeptic's perspective, this account saps skeptics of their moral agency because they lack the requisite moral commitments to respond in a praiseworthy way in difficult situations. Indeed, because skeptics neither choose nor avoid, it seems they are no better than non-rational animals, morally speaking.

Sextus raises this very objection in *Against the Ethicists* (M 11.164–166). He imagines a skeptic confronted by a powerful tyrant, who demands the skeptic commit an unspeakable deed or otherwise be tortured and executed. The non-skeptical opponent thinks this situation forces the skeptic into making a real, principled moral choice. Sextus, however, replies that skeptics simply will do what they do based upon the dispositions formed by “ancestral laws and customs” (M 11.166, trans. Bett 1997). Sextus thinks skeptics fare better here than those who hold dogmatic beliefs about what is really good and bad because the skeptics merely react from their dispositions, whereas the non-skeptics not only choose and act but also have further troubling beliefs about those very choices and actions—whether they *really* did the right thing, and so on (M 11.166). Bett (2019, 160–161) argues that Sextus' reply is dissatisfying because his answer too easily emphasizes skeptical detachment from the self. He suggests that if habit does cause the skeptic's reaction, then the skeptic will choose the path of least resistance, that is, do the tyrant's unspeakable deed. After all, whether the deed is really bad, the skeptic has no opinion. For the skeptic, acquiescing simply preserves tranquility and avoids more difficulties.

If Bett is right about the skeptical way of life, indeed it does appear dissatisfying, especially if skeptics are likely to bow to threats and coercion. While the role of disposition, which Bett highlights in his account, I think is right, he underplays the role that skeptical practice itself plays in the shaping of the skeptic's dispositions. Put another way, the skeptical way of life has its own skeptical cultural, as it were, which places the student on a path for developing the kinds of dispositions that realize the tranquility that is its goal. This is why an intercultural approach enhances our understanding of way-of-life skepticism because Madhyamaka elaborates just such a path, or paths, that develops the dispositions of the student making progress (Garfield 2015, 294–317; 2016, 80–81). These paths are the “outwardly” directed Eightfold Path of early Buddhism and the “inwardly” directed Bodhisattva Path of Mahāyāna Buddhism. They provide the student with the regimen of exercises for the transformation of vision characteristic of way-of-life philosophies. This is why Madhyamaka emphasizes not only virtuous conduct but also meditation, and where Madhyamaka is deeply embedded in education, such as Tibetan Buddhism, live philosophical debate plays a crucial role in the formation of such dispositions (Brons 2018, 340–342). The formation of these dispositions are the virtuous practices of skepticism. But can skeptics really call anything a virtue? Aren't skeptics supposed to suspend judgment on such matters as what is *really* virtuous or vicious? The skeptics can

speak of virtues by using the phrases of skeptical shorthand (such as the skeptical phrases in *PH* 1.187–205). For example, skeptics might say that when they talk about virtues, they are saying “those practices that shape the skeptics’ dispositions so that they are habitually inclined to react in ways that make progress toward freedom from suffering.” What’s more, skeptics are always working toward a mature skeptical way of life; what characterizes their practice in contrast to dogmatists’ is skeptics keep on investigating. After all, as Sextus tells us, skeptics begin their first inquiry as non-skeptics in search of tranquility and true beliefs, and only convert to skepticism as a result of the peace of mind they discover upon suspending judgment (*PH* 1.12; *M* 1.6).

Realizing the important formative role of skeptical practice itself in shaping the skeptic’s dispositions also addresses the questions of moral conformism and care (Bett 2019, 161–162). The skeptical way of life has its own culture and virtues. Indeed, this is why skeptics are philanthropic, applying their therapy to those who suffer from dogmatic belief (*PH* 3.280–281). But why a compassionate culture and not a cruel culture? Is there any intrinsic link between the skeptic’s philanthropic care and skeptical practice? Couldn’t the skeptical way have been otherwise? The Pyrrhonists, on the one hand, have nothing to say on this matter: they encounter suffering and react to remove it, like a dog that removes a thorn stuck in its paw (*PH* 1.70, 1.283). This practice has developed over time based on experience. Searching for intrinsic links is the mistaken worrying of one suffering from dogmatic philosophizing, like Candrakīrti’s shopper who wants to buy some of that nothing. The Mādhyamikas, on the other hand, do describe a relationship between the realization of emptiness and care (*karuṇā*). In the famous verses of his *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* = *BCA*), the Mādhyamika ethicist Śāntideva (ca. eighth century C.E.) shows that the realization of emptiness cancels out the conceptualizing of suffering as belonging to a self (*BCA* 8.90–103).<sup>15</sup> According to Śāntideva, suffering has no owner due to the emptiness of all things. What’s more, the realization of this emptiness is cognitively incompatible with selfish action, that is, if one has realized emptiness it is impossible to engage in selfish acts. Hence, just as we should remove our own suffering, so too should we remove others’. Suffering, after all, belongs to no one. But is not suffering itself empty, not bad? Skeptics suspend judgment whether suffering is indeed really bad, but that suffering is empty makes no difference to their dispositions to remove it. Indeed, whether it goes by *karuṇā* or *philanthrōpia*, whether the ailment is of body or mind, skeptics are disposed to be compassionate.

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<sup>15</sup> These famous verses, *BCA* 8.90–103, “have been the center of debate in the study of Buddhist ethics” (Cowherds 2016b, 55). See the translation along with traditional commentary in the Cowherds (2016b, 59–60, 241–248). The objections of Williams ([1998] 2009) have stimulated considerable scholarship. Again, the Cowherds (2016b) is a good starting point, especially the three interpretations they outline (Cowherds 2016b, 60–74).



Finally, let us address one more practical question: how do skeptics, like the Mādhyamikas and Pyrrhonists, recommend their way of life as one worth going in for? The answer to this question should now be clearer. In contrast to dogmatic thinkers who advocate for their way of life as best, neither Mādhyamikas nor Pyrrhonists can directly recommend their skeptical way of life. Indeed, according to the skeptics, it is precisely the dogmatists' own frame of thought—that there really are justifications based on rational standards for a best way of life—which is mistaken and leads to a life of anxiety and troubles. Pyrrhonists, acting as philosophic physicians, address their arguments to these dogmatic beliefs as a treatment for the suffering that those dogmatic beliefs cause (*PH* 3.280–281). Mādhyamikas, perhaps, have a larger skeptical toolbox in this respect: they can engage with non-skeptics at the conventional level. In other words, they can speak in a way that non-skeptics take to be commonsense even if mature Mādhyamikas realize this conventional speech is part of a fiction that causes attachment and suffering. So, just as a psychiatrist may tentatively accept some of the delusions of an ill patient to better address the necessary therapies to them, so too Mādhyamikas may speak conventionally in order to turn their patients toward relinquishing the dogmatic views that cause their suffering (Cowherds 2016b, 218–219). These skeptical techniques, then, loosen the grip on the beliefs that cause suffering and reveal the peace and tranquility at the heart of the skeptical approach. Non-skeptics, then, may first encounter this skeptical way of life in the philanthropic care and compassion which is addressed to them and animates the skeptics' activity. Indeed, while skeptics suspend judgment on the moral quality of their dispositions or the practical activity that emerges from them, non-skeptics observing the skeptical way from the outside may very well recognize these as virtues and morally praiseworthy. But are they *really* or *ultimately* morally praiseworthy? Mature skeptics, both Mādhyamikas and Pyrrhonists, have nothing to say on this matter, but if their actions appear morally attractive and their tranquil way of life appears desirable, then these initial encounters with the skeptical way may provide those first impulses to the non-skeptic to adopt the skeptical way of life.

## **5 Conclusion**

This essay has developed an intercultural approach to the skeptical way of life. This approach to skepticism was illustrated through an interpretation of two classical traditions, the Pyrrhonian tradition of ancient Greece and the Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition of classical India. It emphasized several important features that characterize both traditions' skeptical ways of life: a goal of tranquility or of freedom from disturbance and suffering, a philosophical strategy of dialectical argument that terminates in the suspension of judgment or the abandon-

ment of views, a purgative philosophic therapy, and life without belief. Finally, the constellation of practical questions that emerge from the skeptical way of life, including the skeptic's character, conformity, and care are developed and addressed through appreciating the role skeptical practice itself plays in developing the dispositions of the skeptic. The essay, I hope, has satisfied one last aim, namely, to show by way of this essay's example how our understanding of skepticism and ancient philosophy is enhanced through an intercultural approach.

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