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*Buddhism and Scepticism: Historical,
Philosophical, and Comparative Perspectives*

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A Review of *Buddhism and Scepticism: Historical, Philosophical, and Comparative Perspectives*

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Buddhism and Scepticism: Historical, Philosophical, and Comparative Perspectives. Edited by Oren Hanner. Hamburg Buddhist Studies 13. Bochum/Frieburg: Projekt Verlag, 2020, 183 pages, ISBN 978-3-89733-558-5 (E-Book), ISBN 978-3-89733-518-9 (hardback), \$25.00.

The edited volume *Buddhism and Scepticism: Historical, Philosophical, and Comparative Perspectives* brings together a remarkable group of scholars to navigate the intricate interplay between Buddhist thought and skeptical philosophy. Through a series of meticulously researched chapters by Mark Siderits, Vincent Eltschinger, Ethan Mills, Georgios T. Halkias, Adrian Kuzminski, Oren Hanner, and James Mark Shields, the volume traverses historical, philosophical, and practical landscapes, illuminating the rich dialogue that Buddhism has entertained with various forms of skepticism across centuries and cultures. From ancient philosophical debates in the Indian subcontinent to contemporary reinterpretations of Buddhist practice in the secular context, the contributions collectively reveal how skepticism has served as both a challenge to and a resource for Buddhist thought. Each chapter, with its unique focus and approach,

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underscores the diversity within Buddhist traditions and the multifaceted nature of skepticism, thereby offering fresh insights into how these traditions have negotiated questions of knowledge, belief, ethics, and practice. This volume stands as a testament to the vibrant exchange between Buddhism and skepticism, inviting readers to reconsider the boundaries of these traditions and the potential for their mutual enrichment.

Mark Siderits' chapter "Some Sceptical Doubts about 'Buddhist Scepticism'" is a critical examination of the notion that Indian Buddhist philosophy harbors a significant strain of skepticism akin to Hellenistic or modern philosophical skepticism. Siderits challenges the application of skepticism within Buddhist philosophical contexts, particularly within Yogācāra and Madhyamaka schools, arguing that when Buddhist philosophers adopt skeptical strategies, they often encounter conceptual difficulties.

Siderits begins by outlining different meanings of skepticism, distinguishing between ontological and epistemological skepticism, and further categorizing the latter into radical skepticism and Pyrrhonian skepticism. He explores the potential roles of skepticism in Buddhism, questioning the extent to which Buddhist thinkers can be said to engage with skeptical doubt, especially given their acceptance of doctrines like karma and rebirth which would ostensibly be at odds with a Pyrrhonian commitment to withholding judgment on non-evident matters.

The discussion moves to a nuanced analysis of skepticism's limitations when applied to Buddhist doctrines. Siderits scrutinizes the use of skepticism in arguing against the existence of an external world and the self, pointing out that such strategies might not align with the semantic internalism and epistemological positions inherent in Buddhist thought. He contrasts this with the semantic externalism found in non-Asian philosophy, suggesting that Buddhist philosophy, particularly the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka schools, employs a different approach to understanding the nature of reality and knowledge.

Siderits pays special attention to the Madhyamaka school, arguing against equating its philosophy with Pyrrhonian skepticism despite superficial similarities. He suggests that Madhyamaka's aim is not to induce tranquility through suspension of judgment but to eliminate existential suffering by undermining the notion of intrinsic natures or essences. This objective diverges significantly from the Pyrrhonian goal of achieving tranquility through *epoché* (suspension of judgment). He argues that Madhyamaka's critical examination of philosophical and metaphysical claims is not an endorsement of skepticism but a method to reveal the lack of inherent essence in phenomena, which is a distinct philosophical objective.

Vincent Eltschinger's chapter "Beyond Reasonable Doubt? A Note on Dharmakīrti and Scepticism" explores the complex relationship between Dharmakīrti's epistemology and skepticism. In stark contrast to Madhyamaka, he argues, Dharmakīrti's epistemological tradition is characterized by its more affirmative stance on the possibility of knowledge and truth.

Eltschinger begins by contrasting Dharmakīrti's epistemological system with skepticism, emphasizing the former's commitment to the reliability of perception and inference as the two valid sources of knowledge. This system, as Eltschinger notes, aligns Dharmakīrti more closely with Stoicism's optimistic view of human knowledge rather than with skepticism's methodological doubt and suspension of judgment. Dharmakīrti's approach, grounded in the belief that reality can be known and adequately described, contrasts with the skeptical perspective, which questions the very possibility of certain knowledge.

The chapter further delves into Dharmakīrti's handling of the unknowability of transempirical realms, such as the law of karmic retribution and other religious claims. Eltschinger highlights Dharmakīrti's pragmatic approach to scripture and religious practice, noting his method for assessing the reliability of scriptures based on their empirical verifiability

and internal consistency. This method, while seeking to bridge the epistemic gap between empirical and transempirical knowledge, underscores Dharmakīrti's attempt to navigate the limitations of human cognition without resorting to skepticism.

Eltschinger's analysis is especially helpful in shining a light on the nuanced ways Dharmakīrti addresses the challenges of action and decision-making in the face of uncertainty, particularly concerning religious practices aimed at achieving transempirical goals. Through a critical examination of Dharmakīrti's methods for validating scriptures and the rational justification for acting under uncertainty, Eltschinger reveals Dharmakīrti's sophisticated approach to epistemological challenges, which, although not skeptical, incorporates elements of rational evaluation and probabilistic reasoning.

The chapter compellingly argues that while Dharmakīrti is not a sceptic in the traditional sense, his philosophical inquiries into the nature of knowledge, reality, and the limits of human understanding display a profound engagement with the epistemological issues that also preoccupy skeptical thought. Eltschinger's analysis not only clarifies Dharmakīrti's position within the broader landscape of Indian Buddhist philosophy but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the interactions between Buddhist epistemology and skepticism.

Ethan Mills's chapter "Nāgārjuna's Scepticism about Philosophy" offers a reevaluation of Nāgārjuna, traditionally seen as the foundational figure of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Through a careful analysis of Nāgārjuna's texts, Mills posits that Nāgārjuna should be interpreted not as propounding another philosophical system but as engaging in a form of skepticism aimed at dismantling the very enterprise of philosophical theorizing itself. This skepticism, according to Mills, is directed not towards external objects of knowledge but towards philosophical activity, making Nāgārjuna a unique figure in both Asian and Non-Asian philosophical traditions.

Mills articulates a two-phase approach in Nāgārjuna's methodology: the first phase involves presenting arguments for the emptiness of all phenomena, while the second phase demonstrates that this notion of emptiness itself negates any philosophical stance, including the stance on emptiness. This reading intriguingly suggests that Nāgārjuna's ultimate goal is not to establish a new doctrine but to lead practitioners towards a state free from conceptual proliferation and philosophical attachment, a state Mills identifies with *nirvāṇa*.

One of the strengths of Mills's interpretation is its ability to reconcile the seemingly contradictory aspects of Nāgārjuna's work: his rigorous arguments against metaphysical assertions and his caution against holding any fixed views, even those about emptiness. By framing Nāgārjuna as a skeptic about philosophy, Mills provides a coherent understanding of Nāgārjuna's project as fundamentally therapeutic, aimed at liberating individuals from the confines of doctrinal adherence and conceptual elaboration.

Mills also situates Nāgārjuna within a broader cross-cultural context of philosophical skepticism, drawing parallels with figures like Sextus Empiricus and Zhuangzi, and highlighting Nāgārjuna's unique contribution to this tradition. This comparative approach not only enriches our understanding of Nāgārjuna but also challenges the conventional boundaries between philosophical traditions, suggesting a more interconnected global history of skeptical thought.

In addition, Mills addresses potential objections to his interpretation, particularly the concern that skepticism seems at odds with Nāgārjuna's Buddhist commitments. By delineating Nāgārjuna's skepticism as a practice aimed at the cessation of conceptual proliferation, Mills convincingly argues that such skepticism is not only compatible with Buddhism but embodies its core soteriological aims. This argument is bolstered by historical examples of skeptical readings of Nāgārjuna within the

Buddhist tradition, thereby grounding Mills's interpretation within a plausible historical framework.

Georgios T. Halkias's chapter, "Yavanayāna: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage," presents an examination of the philosophical parallels and potential historical interconnections between early Pyrrhonism and Buddhism. Situating Pyrrho of Elis within a broader context of cross-cultural exchange, Halkias not only contributes to the ongoing discourse on the origins and influences of Pyrrhonism but also provides a nuanced exploration of its soteriological dimensions, which bear striking resemblances to Buddhist thought.

Halkias navigates through the complexities of ancient philosophical traditions with a meticulous eye for detail, drawing upon a rich tapestry of scholarly work that spans decades. His analysis is rooted in the examination of historical figures such as Pyrrho and Nāgārjuna, exploring their philosophical legacies through the lens of soteriology. By comparing the soteriological aims and methods of Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, Halkias opens up new avenues for understanding the transformative potential embedded in ancient skeptical practices.

One of the chapter's strengths lies in its interdisciplinary approach, bridging the gap between Hellenistic philosophy and Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. Halkias skillfully employs historical, textual, and philosophical analysis to argue for a more interconnected understanding of these traditions than previously acknowledged. The chapter challenges the notion of Pyrrhonism as merely a Greek philosophical phenomenon, suggesting instead that it was part of a larger, transcontinental dialogue on the nature of suffering, liberation, and the means to achieve tranquility.

Halkias's exploration of the Aristocles Passage as a foundational text for understanding Pyrrho's thought is particularly illuminating. By dissecting the passage's implications for Pyrrhonist and Buddhist practices alike, Halkias demonstrates how both traditions emphasize the suspension of judgment, the cultivation of equanimity, and the attainment of

a state of peace as central to their soteriological goals. This analysis not only enriches our understanding of Pyrrho's teachings but also highlights the profound ethical and practical dimensions of skepticism.

Moreover, the chapter's discussion of the "Yavanayāna" concept—a neologism coined by Halkias to describe a "Greek vehicle" of soteriology akin to Buddhist paths—provides a compelling framework for examining the cross-cultural transmission of ideas. This innovative concept challenges the boundaries between Eastern and Non-Asian philosophical traditions, suggesting that the quest for liberation from suffering is a universal concern that transcends geographical and cultural divides.

However, while Halkias's argument for direct influence between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism is compelling, the chapter could benefit from a more cautious approach to claims of direct transmission. The absence of conclusive historical evidence necessitates a careful balance between suggesting influence and acknowledging the potential for parallel development. Nonetheless, Halkias's speculative exploration contributes significantly to the ongoing debate and opens up fertile ground for future research.

Adrian Kuzminski's chapter, "The Evident and the Non-Evident: Buddhism through the Lens of Pyrrhonism," is a compelling examination of the intersections between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, shedding light on the philosophical underpinnings and practical applications of both traditions. Kuzminski adeptly navigates through the historical contexts and philosophical nuances of Pyrrhonism, elucidating its foundational principles and their remarkable congruence with Buddhist thought.

The chapter begins with an overview of Pyrrhonism, highlighting its origins with Pyrrho of Elis and its development into a distinct philosophical tradition focused on agnosticism and the suspension of judgment. Kuzminski's detailed exploration of Pyrrhonism's core tenets—particularly the distinction between the evident (our immediate thoughts

and sensations) and the non-evident (beliefs about absent things)—provides a solid foundation for drawing parallels with Buddhist principles.

Kuzminski's proposal to view Pyrrhonism through a Buddhist lens is both innovative and insightful. By emphasizing the shared emphasis on direct experience and the rejection of dogmatic assertions, the chapter illuminates the common ground between these two ancient traditions. The comparison extends beyond mere philosophical curiosity, suggesting a profound influence of Indian thought on Pyrrho during his time in India, thereby challenging conventional understandings of Pyrrhonism's origins and development.

The chapter's strength lies in its nuanced analysis of the evident and non-evident, and how these concepts resonate with the Buddhist notions of dependent origination and emptiness. Kuzminski successfully argues that both Pyrrhonism and Buddhism advocate for a life led by direct experience, free from the trappings of belief and dogma. This approach fosters a state of tranquility and freedom from suffering, echoing the soteriological goals of both traditions.

Kuzminski's exploration of the suspension of judgment in Pyrrhonism as akin to the Buddhist path of non-attachment and mindfulness provides a fresh perspective on ancient philosophical practices. This alignment underscores the potential for cross-cultural philosophical dialogue and the universal quest for peace and understanding amidst the uncertain and impermanent nature of existence.

While Kuzminski's arguments are persuasive, the chapter could benefit from a more critical examination of the differences between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, particularly in their metaphysical and ethical implications. While the parallels are striking, the distinctions could offer further insights into the unique contributions of each tradition to the global philosophical landscape.

Oren Hanner's chapter, "Scripture and Scepticism in Vasubandhu's Exegetical Method" is a nuanced exploration of Vasubandhu's approach to textual interpretation within the complexities of philosophical skepticism. Hanner delves into the ideas of Vasubandhu, a pivotal figure in the development of Buddhist philosophy, to examine the intricacies between faith in scriptural authority and the employment of skepticism as a tool for deeper understanding.

The chapter is particularly gripping in its exploration of how Vasubandhu navigates the tension between reverence for the Buddha's teachings and the recognition that critical interrogation of these teachings can lead to a more profound comprehension and appreciation. Hanner skillfully highlights Vasubandhu's methodological innovation: transforming religious skepticism into epistemological skepticism. This transformation does not undermine the authority of the scriptures but instead questions the fallibility of interpretation, thus preserving the sanctity of the texts while advocating for a rigorous, intellectually engaged approach to their study.

Hanner's discussion on the differentiation between religious and epistemological skepticism within Vasubandhu's work enriches the reader's understanding of Buddhist hermeneutics. By drawing parallels with the skepticism of early modern thinkers like Descartes and Spinoza, Hanner places Vasubandhu's thought in a broader philosophical context, illustrating the universal relevance of his method. This comparative analysis not only highlights the sophistication of Vasubandhu's approach but also demonstrates the chapter's contribution to the academic field of Buddhist Studies and Buddhist ethics, showing that skepticism, when properly harnessed, can serve as a bridge to deeper faith and understanding.

Additionally, Hanner's examination of the hermeneutical strategies employed by Vasubandhu, such as the distinction between explicit and implicit meanings, offers valuable insights into the broader Buddhist exegetical tradition. These strategies showcase the adaptive and dynamic

nature of Buddhist scriptural interpretation, emphasizing the active role of the practitioner in engaging with the texts. Hanner's analysis thus not only sheds light on Vasubandhu's specific contributions but also on the rich tapestry of Buddhist philosophical discourse.

The chapter does not shy away from the challenges and controversies that arise from Vasubandhu's method. Hanner navigates through these with a critical eye, acknowledging the limits and potential pitfalls of applying skepticism to religious texts. This balanced approach enriches the reader's appreciation of the complexity of the issues at hand, offering a nuanced perspective that is both critical and respectful.

James Mark Shields's chapter, "Sceptical Buddhism as Provenance and Project," is a deep dive into the intersections of Buddhism with various forms of skepticism, particularly as these intersections manifest in the modern era. Shields embarks on an ambitious journey, weaving together threads from secular, critical, skeptical, and radical Buddhism to explore the potential of Buddhism as a philosophical, ethical, and political project fit for the Twenty-first century. His exploration is grounded in a nuanced understanding of skepticism—not merely as doubt but as a profound questioning of epistemological and metaphysical claims, which, in turn, can lead to a transformative engagement with the world.

Shields's inquiry into whether a skeptical Buddhism can coexist with engaged Buddhist practice is both timely and crucial. His analysis suggests that skepticism, far from being antithetical to Buddhist praxis, can enrich and deepen the tradition's commitment to alleviating suffering in a complex, globalized world. This perspective challenges the reader to reconsider common perceptions of skepticism as merely a stance of negation or withdrawal.

One of the chapter's strengths lies in Shields's ability to situate his discussion within both the historical development of Buddhist thought and contemporary debates. By drawing on the work of figures like Stephen Batchelor, Shields highlights the ongoing efforts to reformulate

Buddhism in terms that resonate with modern sensibilities, emphasizing ethical engagement and a critical stance towards received dogmas. This engagement with secular Buddhism, which seeks a middle path between religious orthodoxy and secular materialism, is a convincing vision of Buddhism as a lived philosophy that addresses the existential concerns of the contemporary world.

Furthermore, Shields's examination of the Critical Buddhist movement introduces readers to a vital discourse on the necessity of a critical approach within Buddhism itself. The Critical Buddhists's emphasis on distinguishing between helpful and harmful conventions provides a rigorous framework for evaluating and revitalizing Buddhist practices. This critique is particularly relevant in a time when Buddhism, like many religious and philosophical traditions, faces the challenge of remaining relevant and effective in addressing social and ethical issues.

Shields's chapter goes beyond mere analysis to engage with the possibilities for a "radical Buddhism" that draws on the liberative potentials within the tradition. His exploration of Japanese New Buddhism and its intersections with progressive and radical political movements opens up new avenues for understanding Buddhism's role in social transformation. This discussion is invaluable for scholars and practitioners alike, offering a richer understanding of Buddhism's capacity to contribute to a more just and compassionate world.

In summary, *Buddhism and Scepticism: Historical, Philosophical, and Comparative Perspectives* demonstrates the profound and varied dialogues between Buddhist thought and skeptical inquiry, as illustrated by the insightful contributions of its distinguished authors. This collection not only highlights the historical depth of these interactions but also showcases the relevance of skeptical approaches to contemporary Buddhist practice and ethical considerations. Each chapter in its own way expands our understanding of Buddhism's engagement with skepticism, from the epistemological challenges it poses to the opportunities it offers for

doctrinal and ethical reflection and innovation. By embracing the complexities of this dialogue, the volume enriches our appreciation of Buddhism's capacity to evolve in response to philosophical scrutiny and to contribute meaningfully to modern discourses on truth, ethics, and the human condition. As such, the volume is an essential contribution to the fields of Buddhist studies, philosophy, and religious studies, offering valuable perspectives for scholars, practitioners, and anyone interested in the dynamic interplay between faith and doubt, tradition, and critique. The book not only advances academic understanding but also invites a broader audience to explore the nuanced ways in which Buddhism and skepticism can inform and transform each other in the quest for wisdom and compassion in an uncertain world.