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SCEPTICISM AND MYSTICISM

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PROFESSOR DANIEL INGALLS is neither a sceptic nor a mystic. But it is obvious to some of us that he has sympathy for both. It may be that he has more sympathy for the sceptic than for the mystic. In my study of the history of scepticism in India I have often been struck by the following phenomenon: The outstanding and even extreme sceptical arguments are usually to be found in the writings of the authors who were initially mystically inclined or who would like to push the philosophical or dialectical argumentation to its utmost limit so that the rational means would prove to be bankrupt! I propose to deal with this phenomenon here very briefly. It is hoped that an 'empathetic' understanding of such a phenomenon is possible even when one does neither have a sceptical point of view nor even a mystical one. In this I have only followed the line which Professor Ingalls has taken in many other similar studies.

It will be seen at the end that the connection that I believe to be there between the sceptical attitude and the mystical is a contingent one. A sceptic does not necessarily become a mystic. Or, to put the matter in another way, it is not true, at least not always true, that the end of the path for a true and serious sceptic is mysticism. Sceptics do not always take a plunge into the 'oceanic feeling' of mysticism. At least I do not hold such a thesis. But that is why it seems more interesting and more intriguing to find the above phenomenon: why did the sceptical tradition form a very important, and almost an inseparable, component of the major mystical traditions of India? What did the mystics have to do with the use of logic and rational means that would have been more appropriate for scepticism? Why is this craving for attempts at rational explanation using logic and dialectics if at the end all this would be superseded by some irrational, inexplicable and ineffable consciousness? If I am going to enjoy poetry would it matter much if I discover that the poet used bad logic and fallacious arguments? The answer to such question is not immediately obvious.

A philosophical sceptic is not an iconoclast or an aggressor in the Temple of Truth, but because of his extreme concern for truth he is reluctant to accept anything less. He persists in seeking and probing. If a

philosopher is one who tries to expound or defend a view about the world or the way the world is or appears to us, a sceptic takes the position of his opponent. Scepticism has in fact formed an important part of philosophic activity in almost all ages everywhere. Indeed, philosophy today is more commonly understood as a kind of activity, and sceptical questions and doubts supply the vital moving force of such activity.

It is difficult to define scepticism. But some broad characterisations can be offered. If the word 'sceptic' means simply 'an inquirer' or 'an investigator' (as has been noted by R. G. Bury in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*)¹ then many philosophers could be called 'sceptics'. But obviously the word has a more specific sense. Scepticism can be understood as a critical philosophical attitude consistently maintained throughout. However, scepticism has acquired a negative connotation. A sceptic rejects the validity of any knowledge-claim or truth-claim.

The spirit of scepticism can be carried on to the fields of morality, religion and politics. The concern of the sceptic in such fields is not so much with truth as with the justification or rightness of certain principles, concepts or ideas. Scepticism usually aligns itself with pessimism as well as 'passivism'. It is difficult for a sceptic to be an optimist or a political activist or a revolutionary, for his scepticism would not be consistent with his activity. But activism and scepticism would not be an impossible combination in some humans, for consistency is not an inalienable trait of all humans. A sceptic's positive characterization is that he is a seeker after truth. In practice, however, a sceptic may be a *conformist* with the prevailing social and political norms. He may live by the existing rules and standards while not believing in their absolute validity. He is not, as I have already said, a revolutionary, for he lacks conviction about the truth or the goal of such actions. A sceptic has to be a good dialectician, skillful in the art of argumentation. He can be a 'sophist' in a non-pejorative sense. He is like a well-armed man, always

¹ See R. G. Bury, *Sextus Empiricus I: Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Loeb Classical Library, London, 1933, p. xxix.

on guard and ready for the argument, but he never provokes any. Or, he may be a man who carefully avoids arguments and renounces contentions, for it may be that "philosophic problems *completely* disappear" for him (as Wittgenstein notes in *Philosophical Investigations* I, 133).² I shall argue that a sceptic can also be a mystic.

Who deserves to be called 'sceptic' according to the above characterizations? In the Indian context, we can mention Sañjaya and a few other śramanas who were contemporaries of the Buddha (563–483 B.C.). In the history of Western thought, Sextus Empiricus (c. 200 A.D.) is often regarded as the most well-known of those who call themselves sceptics. In developing the position of Indian scepticism, I shall draw mainly from the writings of three different philosophers, Nāgārjuna (c. 150 A.D.), Jāyarāśi (c. 800 A.D.) and Śrīharṣa (c. 1100 A.D.). They represent three different philosophic traditions of India. The first is a Mādhyamika Buddhist, the second was either a materialist or an agnostic, the third was an Advaita Vedāntin (a mystic). But in spite of these differences, they shared a common style of philosophizing as well as a common attitude towards the discovery of truth. Śrīharṣa, the last named philosopher, noted explicitly this common style and argued that in spite of the well-known differences in their metaphysical beliefs, their philosophical style was bound to be in the same way critical, sceptical, refutative and destructive.

A philosophical position can hardly be vindicated or established unless it has answered its critics and responded to the objections of its opponents. In the Indian tradition, the opponents' criticisms and objections are usually grouped under the rubric *pūrvapakṣa*. To build up the *pūrvapakṣa* in a greatly meticulous manner has been the general practice of all systematic philosophers of India since the first century A.D. It has been claimed that if the *pūrvapakṣa* is not properly understood, the philosopher's own position will hardly make any sense. Our understanding of a doctrine deepens by our understanding of not so much what it says as what it refutes and rejects.

An opponent is not always a sceptic. For usually the opponent refutes a rival position and gives at the same time arguments to sustain his own position. But if the opponent does not have a position of his own or he does not want to argue for his own position but is simply interested in refuting all other positions or theses, then he becomes a sceptic or a follower of sceptical methodology.

A sceptic cannot have a position of his own in principle, for to be consistent he has to be sceptical of all theses, all positions. Scepticism in other words has to be paradoxical in order to be consistent. But the air of paradoxicality, I suggest, can be removed.

Refutation of a philosophical position usually implies acceptance of its negation, i.e., a counter-position, a counter-thesis. But a sceptic cannot maintain his scepticism by assenting to a counter-thesis. It is his duty to disagree with both the thesis and its anti-thesis or counter-thesis by assigning reasons in both cases. He has to suspend his judgment in favor of either. It is however not easy to maintain such all round scepticism. It is rather easy to be a non-believer in some particular doctrine or other. But philosophical scepticism is of a different breed. A sceptic has to be well-conversant with the art of philosophic debate. For scepticism can be sustained only by a master-debater, a dialectician. He has to employ skillfully his *pro*-arguments as well as his *contra*-argument so that his sceptical position, if it is a position at all, would remain uncompromised. For any *pro*-argument for a doctrine, he has to find an equally strong *contra*-argument so that the tug of war of pro's and con's comes to a standstill and balances one another. It is therefore obvious that such scepticism can hardly flourish unless in a *milieu* where the art as well as the theory of disputation or dialectic has reached a well-developed form. Such a situation did obtain in ancient and classical India, as it did in Greece. Hence the sceptics were not far behind.

SAÑJAYA

Professor H. Ui has described Sañjaya's philosophy as a sort of scepticism on the one hand and a primitive step towards a critique of knowledge on the other.³ This assessment of Sañjaya seems to me to be fairly correct. This tradition must have been the precursor of the later-day scepticism about knowledge and perception as reflected in the writings of Nāgārjuna, Jāyarāśi and Śrīharṣa.

Sañjaya questioned the knowledge-claims of other *śramanas* and *brāhmaṇas* regarding certain moral, religious and metaphysical matters. Typical questions asked in those days (see *Dīgha-Nikāya*) were: "Is there a soul?" "Is there an after-life?" and "What is right and what is wrong?" Sañjaya and his followers argued that it is impossible to *know* correct answers to such questions.⁴

² L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, para 133 (Blackwell, Oxford, 1958).

³ H. Ui, *Vaiśeṣika Philosophy* (ed. F. W. Thomas), 1917, p. 23 (New edition, Varanasi, 1962).

⁴ See *Dīgha Nikāya* I, 27.

It should be noted that these early Indian sceptics attached higher value to ethical development and final salvation than to resolution of the philosophical questions. They apparently maintained that it would be wrong or morally reprehensible to make false claims, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Thus, Sañjaya said that since he did not (and in fact nobody did) *know* the answers to such questions he would not claim that he knew, for that would be a false claim and would mislead people (which would be immoral). The Jaina canonical literature, as Hermann Jacobi pointed out, noted that these *śramaṇa* sceptics maintained that no knowledge but *tapas* (ascetic austerity) was necessary for salvation or final beatitude. These sceptics were similar to those described by Sextus, who resorted to their *epochē* (suspending all judgments) to gain the state of unperturbedness or *ataraxia*. Sextus says:⁵

“The man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly; and, in consequence, he is unperturbed.”

In the Indian context, these sceptics were also recluses (*śramaṇas*) and hence were committed to the ascetic way of life practicing austerities (*tapas*) to achieve quietude.

Some of the *śramaṇas* were however astute debaters. In this regard, they can be placed somewhere in the midway between the Greek sophists and the Greek sceptics. The early canonical literature of Buddhism and Jainism bears ample witness to this fact. Oldenberg has put the point nicely in his outstanding book *The Buddha* (tr. W. Holms):⁶

“Certain phenomena which developed themselves in the busy bustle of the ascetic and philosophizing circles, may be described as a species of Indian *sophistic*; wherever a Socrates appears, sophists cannot fail to follow. The condition under which these sophistic arose were quite similar to those which gave birth to their Greek counterpart . . . there followed Gorgiases, and Protagorases, and a whole host of ingenious species, somewhat frivolous virtuosi, dealers in dialectic and rhetoric.”

Even if we discount Oldenberg’s enthusiasm for comparison of East and West, his general point is correct, as the later history of the art of philosophical disputation in India shows.

⁵ Sextus 1, 28.

⁶ H. Oldenberg, *The Buddha*, 1882 edition, p. 68.

The concerns of the early Indian recluse-sceptic were mainly spiritual, moral and religious. Hence unlike the Greek sophists, they did not go to the extent of teaching the art of debate and rhetoric to the rich young men in exchange for money. Nor did they (with a few exceptions e.g., Jābāli in the *Rāmāyaṇa*) “meddle” in politics or public affairs of the government.

The principles of the art of argumentation that were developed in classical India made room for the kind of debate that a sceptic had to adopt in order to refute all theses without asserting any of his own. This type of debate was called *vitaṇḍā* later in the *Nyāyasūtras*. In the early period, Sañjaya developed a crude technique of what may be called a five-fold rejection of a position: (1) “Not so,” (2) “Not thus,” (3) “Not otherwise,” (4) “Not not so,” (5) “Not *no* to not so.” The upshot of this rather clumsy negation and double negation was to maintain an attitude of “non-assertion.” Sañjaya used this method in its crude form, but Nagarjuna perfected it with his tetralemmas, dilemmas and reductios (*prasaṅga*).

Notice that this does not amount strictly to “anti-rationalism” or illogicality. Refutation in this context can be taken to be an “illocutionary” negation (distinct from a ‘propositional’ negation), as it is done in the Speech-Act theory of John Searle.⁷ Sañjaya said about the existence of the after-life: “Neither do I say that there is an after-life nor do I say that there is none.” This seems consistent, for it is not a conjunction of a proposition and its negation as “ $\vdash (\exists x)(x \text{ is } F)$ and $\vdash \sim (\exists x)(x \text{ is } F)$ ”, but conjunction of the negation of two speech acts: $\sim \vdash (\exists x) x \text{ is } F$ and $\sim \vdash \sim (\exists x)(x \text{ is } F)$.

NĀGĀRJUNA

I shall take this opportunity to reformulate a Nāgārjunian tetralemma in order to show how sceptical arguments of this kind lead to the direction of mysticism and ineffability doctrine. Consider the following debate modelled after the first verse of Nāgārjuna’s *Mādhyamika Kārikā*.

1. Is a thing produced from itself?
 - 1a. No.
2. Is it produced from something other than itself?
 - 2a. No.
3. Is it produced from both itself and others?
 - 3a. No.
4. Is it produced from neither (or nothing)?
 - 4a. No.

⁷ J. Searle, *Speech-Acts*, Cambridge, 1969, p. 32–3.

It is clear that 1 and 2 are not at least contradictories, for it is possible for a thing to be produced partly from itself and partly from others. Hence 3 is a possible formulation not exhausted by the rejection of 1 and 2. Now the question arises: have we exhausted all possibilities by three rejections 1a, 2a, and 3a? If we have, the fourth must be construed as a question about production itself: Is it *not* produced at all? But Nāgārjuna asks us to reject this also by 4a! How to make sense of this rejection? The problem is this. If refutation of the refutation of production amounts to production itself, then we are back in the game, i.e., with one of the three alternatives, 1, 2, or 3. But they have been already rejected! Therefore 4a cannot be regarded as an ordinary refutation. I intend to call it “the Nāgārjunian refutation” or “the mystic’s refusal” to talk or to play the ball-game. It rejects the context of the debate, the dichotomy of production and non-production. In other words, the sceptic-debater returns the ball to the opponent’s court in the first three cases. But in 4a, he refuses to play. Scepticism thus points up to mysticism, to the ineffability of the ultimates.

One can achieve the same goal by using dialectical arguments and reductios. Nāgārjuna, Śrīharṣa and Jayarāśi were champions of this method. Let me explain it very briefly. The idea is to construe all the possible positions about a philosophical topic or a concept, and reject them one by one by reducing them to some sort of absurdity or showing some contradiction within the concept. When all the positions are in this way refuted, the sceptic debater can then say that he has no position or thesis of his own to defend nor can he assert any. Thus Nagarjuna answered when he was confronted with the paradoxicality of his own position:⁸ “I have no (philosophical) thesis to defend.” A thesis (*pratijñā*) is technically defined in Nyāya as the statement of a position or a view to be proved. Hence the above remark can ambiguously mean either that he has no position of his own or that his position is not stateable. I argue that it is this ingrained ambiguity that transforms scepticism into mysticism.

Nāgārjuna developed a systematic critique of the concepts of knowledge and the knowable. He attacked the idea that there are *prāmāṇas*, i.e., the accredited means of knowledge. The argument is rather well-known. Roughly it is this. If there are accredited means of knowing, either we know them or we don’t. If we know them, we need further accredited means to know that we know them and to know the second set of means we need another, and so on. This is *regressus ad infinitum*:

⁸ See *Vigrahyāvartanī*, verse 29.

Each dog has on its own back a little flea to bite him,
And on that flea another flea and so ad infinitum.

In Sanskrit, the fault is called *anavasthā*, which means that we are on a slippery ground, slipping ever backwards without stopping. Russell has said about such a paradox (*My Philosophical Development*, p. 82)⁹

“... the process is like trying to jump on the shadow of your head.”

But suppose we do not *know* the means. Now if so, how is it established that they are *valid* means, and not tricks? Who or what validates them? There is an old village parable about a witch doctor in Bengal who was a successful exorcist because he used to exorcise persons or objects possessed of evil spirits with the help of a handful of mustard seeds. One day the evil spirit, in order to baffle the exorcism, entered into those seeds themselves. Our situation would be similar if the means were invalid or defective. In reply we may say that certain means are self-validating and self-established. But Nāgārjuna counters this as follows: a) The notion of self-validation suffers from circularity; b) if certain means cannot be known then it contradicts the original thesis of the philosopher about knowledge: we know everything by knowledge (*hīyate vādah*); and c) we need to give a satisfactory answer to the question: why certain objects are self-validating while others are not? What differentiates them? (*viseṣa-hetuś ca vaktavyah*). I shall leave the matter here.

JAYARĀŚI AND ŚRĪHARṢA

Jayarāśi was not a Buddhist. He is usually taken to be a follower of Bṛhaspati, the materialist, the anti-religious sceptic. Professor Walter Ruben is reluctant to call him a materialist because, except for paying only a lip-service to Bṛhaspati, he does not propound any positive materialist doctrine. I agree with Ruben who calls Jayarāśi an agnostic. Jayarāśi critically examined the available definitions of such means of knowledge as perception and inference. In this way he developed the general thesis: it is not possible for us to have “knowledge” in the required sense. For all the available definitions are fundamentally flawed. Definability of concepts ensures their intelligibility. Hence if these concepts lack definability they lack intelligibility. Scepticism thus wins the day.

⁹ B. Russell, *My Philosophical Development*, London, 1959, p. 82.

To illustrate another argument of Jayarāṣi. Roughly, the received doctrine about knowledge is that while not all our cognitive experiences would amount to knowledge, some would become knowledge. Let us say that whenever a cognitive experience has the character E it amounts to knowledge. Now, how do we know that a cognitive experience has E? For if we don't, we would never know that we have knowledge. And if we know E through another cognitive experience, then we need to know another E that characterizes this cognitive experience. And so *ad infinitum*.¹⁰

Śrīharṣa continued the debate (300 hundred years later) almost in a similar vein. In the course of his argumentation, he developed also a sceptical paradox which has kinship with what is called today "Gettier's sceptical paradox" about the concept of knowledge as justified true belief. Śrīharṣa was arguing against the concept of knowledge as the object-corresponding (true) cognitive experience derived from reliable evidence (*pramāṇa*). He said that this is faulty for we can have *true* cognitive experience ("there is fire") from reliable evidence, viz., the premise or the awareness that there is smoke, where such awareness is falsely derived from the misperception of a dust-storm as smoke, and where by accident there is fire. Here the evidence is reliable, a deductive inference, for the falsity of the premises has nothing to do with soundness of inference, but such evidence again is not connected with the *truth* of the cognitive experience in the relevant way. Scepticism wins again for knowledge cannot be defined in this way.¹¹

Śrīharṣa also takes up the cue from Nāgārjuna and continues to defend the position that a sceptic can participate in logical debate without asserting and defending any position of his own, i.e., without forfeiting his sceptical claims. Here the paradox is this. If all philosophical theses are, as the sceptic claims, wrong or 'empty' (*śūnya*) of any substance or essence, then this very thesis suffers from the same fate. And if it does, it cannot do its role, i.e., assert or state anything. And if it does not, we have a counter-example to prove that the thesis is wrong. The way out of this is suggested by the sceptic as follows: It may be that all these are EMPTY, but such a thesis cannot

itself be asserted or stated. A. N. Prior, in explaining J. Buridean's paradox about "no proposition is true" suggested a similar way out:¹²

But if God were to annihilate all negative propositions, there would in fact be no negative propositions, even if this were not then being asserted by any proposition at all. In short, *it can be that no proposition is negative, though it cannot be that "no proposition is negative" is true.*

Making a 'parody' of this, a Buddhist might say: if the Buddha were to empty each proposition of its own meaning-essence, there would be in fact no non-empty proposition, even if *this* fact remains unasserted or unstateable.

A logician like a Naiyāyika may say to a sceptic: "You have to believe in the principles of argument and reasoning. For if you don't, you cannot use them to derive your sceptical conclusion. You should remain silent." In reply, Śrīharṣa has said that this is indeed a poor argument, given in desperation. For the history of philosophy shows that no sceptic, not even a mystic, remained silent without arguing or debating. The choice is open to the sceptic to accept the principles of debate only provisionally. The above argument Śrīharṣa says, cannot be a new kind of "silencing charm" to set the matter at rest. In short, the sceptics do argue the onus (of making him silent) lies with the opponent, not with them.

It has been facetiously suggested that the practical life of a true sceptic would be impossible, for if he did not even believe that the floor would not melt under his feet or that food would satisfy his hunger, he would not be able to walk or eat to survive. This point is easily answered. Jayarāṣi has said that those who are wise recommend that we follow the ordinary worldly behavior, for "with regard to practical behavior the wise resemble the fool or the child." An echo of this is found in the comment of Sextus:¹³

We live in accordance with the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive.

MYSTICISM

William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) noted four common distinctive marks of

¹⁰ Jayarāṣi's *Tattvopaplavasīṃha* is a remarkable book to reconstruct the history of scepticism in India. He has been usually characterised by scholars as an agnostic.

¹¹ Śrīharṣa's *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhāḍya* provides an important landmark to trace the history of Indian dialectics and scepticism. See Phyllis Granoff's *Philosophy and Argument in Late Vedānta*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1978.

¹² See A. N. Prior, *Papers in Logic and Ethics* (eds. Geach and Kenny), London, Duckworth, 1976, p. 144.

¹³ *Sextus* I, p. 23.

any 'mystical' experience: 1) Ineffability, 2) Noetic quality, 3) Transiency, and 4) Passivity. W. T. Stace in his *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1960) has mentioned several other characteristics of a mystical experience. Of all these, I have concentrated upon only one crucial concept: ineffability. In the above therefore I have referred to this one characteristic of mysticism whenever I have shown how a transition from scepticism to mysticism might eventually take place. I shall conclude by elaborating upon this issue.

A sceptic is not necessarily a mystic. At least he is not so initially. And the mystic cannot always be a thoroughgoing sceptic. But the following situation might obtain. A sceptic might keep his mind free of any dogmas, dicta and doctrines. His attitude is something like this. If the mind is free then truth, if there is any, will dawn upon the person automatically. It is sometimes put metaphorically: If the darkness is dispelled, encumbrances of false views and ignorance are removed, then truth will shine in its own glory. No other effort is needed. Sextus has put the point in a different manner. Arne Naess has said:¹⁴

The mature sceptic decides neither for the positive nor for the negative in relation to any doctrine, but allows both possibilities to stand open. . . . To his surprise he eventually finds that *epochē* (suspension of judgment) leads to, or is accompanied by, just that peace of mind (*ataraxia*) which he sets out to achieve by finding truth. The mature sceptic will not, of course, claim that there is a necessary connection between *epochē* and *ataraxia*.

¹⁴ A. Naess, *Scepticism*, Kegan Paul, London, 1968, p. 5.

Śrīharṣa argued that truth or the ultimate truth is either self-evident or unknowable. In either case, it stands to reason for us to keep our minds purged of all the false views, conceptions and dogmas about such ultimate truth. The sceptic's use of logic and dialectic is instrumental. So is the mystic's use of philosophical argumentation. Negative dialectic is like the ladder to be kicked away when the purpose is served. Or to change the metaphor of Wittgenstein to that of Candrakīrti, this use of arguments, etc. is like the raft that one uses to cross the river. But once you are on the other side, you should forget about the raft. Or, as the Buddha said in one of his dialogues: You need the medicine to cure your disease, but once you are cured, you must get the medicine itself purged out of your system. For otherwise you get rid of one disease (one false view) to make room only for another.

It may be that connection between scepticism and mysticism was not as pronounced in the Western tradition as it surely was in the Indian tradition. But this may be just a matter of emphasis. For the connection is obviously not a necessary one. It is contingent. And such contingency does arise. Let us notice still that Sextus has compared the sceptic with Apelles, the court painter of Alexander the Great. Once Apelles was painting a horse and wanted to paint the foam in the mouth of the running horse. Being unsuccessful several times, in despair he flung a wiping sponge at the canvas. And lo and behold, the foam was all of a sudden there as a result of the marks of the sponge.¹⁵ Sceptics get their *ataraxia* in this way suddenly. One can easily be reminded of the *sudden illumination theory* of the Indian mystics!

¹⁵ *Sextus* I, 28.